A Report on the Condition of NGOs and Independent Culture in [redacted]

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A Report on the Condition of NGOs and Independent Culture in Belarus

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PROJECT ORIGINATOR Paweł Laufer

EXECUTIVE EDITOR Paweł Laufer

EDITORIAL BOARD Tatyana Artimovich, Artur Klinov

PROJECT SECRETARY Katarzyna Plebańczyk

TRANSLATORS Sergej Komlach, Konrad Szulga, Swiatłana Kurs, Małgorzata Buchalik, Maryja Łucewicz-Napałkow, Katarzyna Bortnowska, Biuro Tłumaczeń „Narrator”

LANGUAGE EDITORSHIP Dorota Stachura (English), Paweł Laufer, Agnieszka Caban (Polish), Taciana Niadbay (Belarusian, Russian)

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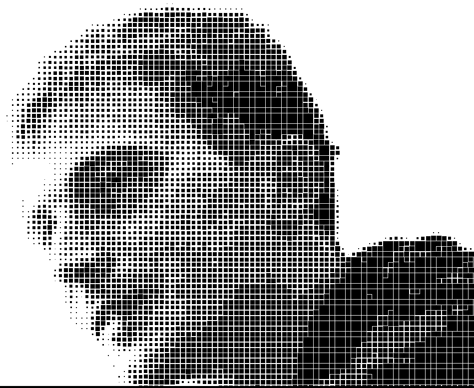
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WITHOUT INVERTED COMMAS

Let us talk and think about Belarus no more. Let us suspend our judgements, expectations, projections, patterns and proposals for solutions, our hermeneutics and policies and deliberations on some or other necessities that Belarus should recognize and accept. Let us put aside our declensions of Belarus for future lessons. Now, somewhat indifferent, in order to speak Belarusian in a more comprehensible manner, let us take part in the lesson of the Belarusian „language:" *A Report on the Condition of NGOs and Independent Culture in Belarus.*

When you read about Belarus on a daily basis, on its phenomena, problems or achievements, the punctuation mark that prevails in a newspaper column, or in the voice of a TV anchorman, is inverted commas. Inverted commas indicate „irony", mark „incompatibility", emphasize the „unnatural", „deviations" from the standard, „apostasy", „metaphor;" it is a conscious emphasis on „irrationality" of what is happening there. Even „Belarus" is written in quotations.

During this lesson, we will use inverted commas to highlight a notion that we address as the know-not's. Before we retreat to our pre-defined positions that we have adopted in Belarusian affairs, and before we take away inverted commas, listen to those who are at the source. Let us give the floor to the best teachers – Belarusian intellectuals, practitioners and artists.

The barely articulated and somewhat covert framework of their lecture rests with three basic questions: What is it like now?, What do we expect from one another?, How can we achieve this?

The knowledge which underlies the cooperation strategies with Belarus is based on scarce and rare publications and analysis. They offer little in

Without inverted commas

terms of grasping current trends and the actual *status quo* in the area of culture and NGOs in Belarus. Hence, it does not help draw up competent and inclusive programmes of cooperation with the cultural community and NGOs in Belarus that would address the most vital issues.

A Report on the Condition of NGOs and Independent Culture in Belarus aspires to be such a response to these shortcomings and to the lack of knowledge about the Belarusian cultural reality, Belarusian independent culture, the third sector (NGOs) and the setting in which they are deemed to operate. *A Report* has been so designed as to be affordable in its form and as a widely available tool for reliable identification of the aforesaid realities, a tool that enables the most effective action in these areas.

Such knowledge and tools for effective action are also craved for by Belarusians themselves; therefore, *A Report* is available in three languages – Belarusian, Polish and English – on the website of Lublin's *Kultura Enter* on-line monthly (www.kulturaenter.pl), and has been printed in Polish and English.

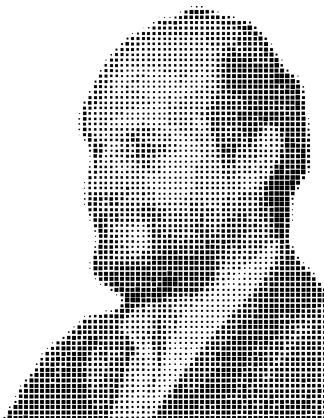
A Report on the Condition of NGOs and Independent Culture Belarus opens a series of seven reports to be produced under the project, A Report on Independent Culture and NGOs in the Eastern Partnership Countries and Russia. Through this large-scale project, we wish to highlight what should particularly be brought to the forefront when gazing towards the post-Soviet countries today. This is, no doubt, the burgeoning partnership and coexistence of the peoples who have a common future and who are fully aware of that.

PAWEŁ LAUFER

We wish to express our gratitude to all who, with their valuable advice, opinion and creative support, have contributed to the final shape of this report. Further thanks go to: Marcin Romanowski, Katarzyna Plebańczyk, Eliana Kisielewska, Anna Kominek, Piotr Zieniuk, Agnieszka Caban, Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, Sebastian Mac, Paweł Kazanecki, Małgorzata Buchalik, Mariusz Maszkiewicz, Andrei Dureika, Taciana Niadbay, Agnieszka Wojciechowska, Siergiej Kowalovov, Konrad Szulga.

HORIZON

A Belarusian-speaking culture activist has next to no chance to turn political leader. Is the Belarusian intelligentsia to blame for the attitude of many of its fellow citizens? Certainly yes – no different attitude of the Belarusian society is possible.



LAVON BARSHCHEUSKI

WHY DOES A BELARUSIAN HEAR NO VOICE OF CULTURE?

19 December 2010 marked the presidential elections in Belarus. Alexander Lukashenko "won" again. I put this word in quotation marks because, as in the previous election, the voting took 5 days and the entire procedure resembled a special operation (it was the duty of every student, militia officer, serviceman, school or university teacher, and virtually every working citizen to cast their vote before 19 December). The opposition representatives were admitted to observe the process of counting votes only on the last voting day, and only in a dozen out of more than six thousand polling stations distributed countrywide. The results of individual presidential candidates in the observer-monitored stations in Minsk, as well as in the oblasts of Vitebsk, Grodno, and Gomel, were as follows: Alexander Lukashenko received from 35 to 52 percent of the vote; as regards his main opponents, the former deputy foreign minister and one of the coordinators of the European Belarus campaign, Andrei Sannikau, received from 16 to 23 percent, vice president of the United Civic Party, Yaroslav Romanchuk, from 5 to 11

percent, and the prominent Belarusian poet and leader of the Tell the Truth! civic action, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu, from 5 to 8 percent.

It is worth noting that as a politician, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu officially launched his campaign in early 2010 by taking the leadership of the said action, which was garnering publicity throughout the past year. However, he has been a well-known Belarusian figure for more than ten years. Already in the 1980s, Nyaklyaeu won renown as a lyrics writer to great music hits; their popularity crossed the boundaries of the then Soviet Belarus. In the days of *perestroika*, he was actively backed by the reformist faction of the Komsomol – the official Belarusian youth organization; in 1988 he was put in charge of a new magazine, *Krynica*, published in Belarusian and Russian with a circulation of over half a million, which was quite an accomplishment, considering the country's population (about 10 million). In 1994, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu was appointed editor-in-chief of a completely transformed *Krynica*, issued only in Belarusian, and intended for intellectuals and leading Belarusian writers. Immediately after Alexander Lukashenko assumed power, Nyaklyaeu's position was not threatened because some of his friendly former Komsomol activists (Komsomol's operation was suspended in the years 1991–1993 thanks to the effort of the Belarusian Popular Front) and other influential figures of the time voiced their support for Lukashenko before the 1994 elections, in which they saw a chance for their own political advancement.

Despite the unwavering support for Nyaklyaeu from the Komsomol's activists (including the last head of the organization during the communist era, and, after 2000, a correspondent of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, Alexandr Fieduta), the most prominent Belarusian intellectuals opposing the communist regime (e.g. Ryhor Baradulin, Uladzimir Arlou, Valjancin Akudovich, and even the legendary Vasil Bykau) never turned their backs to him, considering him to be at least a person from outside the establishment, struggling for the Belarusian identity. In the second half of the 1990s, Nyaklyaeu tried to influence the Lukashenko's circles as the head of the Belarus Writers Association and the editor-in-chief of the state-subsidized artistic and literary weekly *Litaratura i mastactva*. This cooperation soon failed because the regime had already begun to pursue totally different objectives than the promotion of the Belarusian democratic culture. Therefore, in 1999 Nyaklyaeu was forced into exile. He left for Poland and later

lived in Finland, but in 2004 decided to return to Belarus. His literary works were, of course, removed from school reading lists, because he refused to accept a conciliatory attitude towards the regime.

In 2010, as a campaigner, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu launched the most aggressive and technologically advanced election campaign. Moreover, according to independent experts' assessments, he enjoyed the largest financial support from among the opposition candidates. Charismatic Nyaklyaeu wittily recited his own poems and the line, "I came so that you win," became a catchy slogan for the campaign. On the last voting day, fifty minutes before the closing of polling stations, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu was severely beaten by police. Within minutes, the information reached hundreds of thousands of Belarusians, which, according to the observers, become yet another reason to mobilize the opposition supporters during a rally in downtown Minsk. The demonstration was later brutally quelled and at least 790 people, including the seven rivals of the incumbent president to the top office, were detained. That same night, Nyaklyaeu was abducted from the hospital by the secret service and driven in an unknown direction (he was closed in the so-called "American," a KGB confinement, notorious for its Stalinist past).

The whole world protested against the abduction and imprisonment of the Belarusian poet and politician: Vaclav Havel, Wislawa Szymborska, Tom Stoppard, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, George Bush, Jr., and PEN clubs from many countries and continents expressed their mounting concern. However, Belarus went silent about this. Apart from a few intellectual centres and human rights defenders, there was almost no response. Why? Probably, because the Belarusian-speaking poet, or any other cultural activist, has no chance in present-day Belarus to become either a national bard or a popular political leader.

At this point, it is necessary to go back into Belarusian history, perhaps not the most distant and also the recent one. I remember back in the 1980s, as a postgraduate student of Minsk Linguistic University, I was surprised by a conversation with one serious figure, a Belarussian and doctor of philology. He told me that he did not want to hear any more about Yanka Kupala (great Belarusian poet, co-originator of the modern Belarusian language and literature) because "he was messing around with some women..." I told him gently that if you compared Kupala with the Russian classic Alexander

Pushkin, you would find the former almost the most virtuous and innocent person in the world. At this point, my adversary began to shout, "I shall not have the great Pushkin insulted here; this whole Belarusian literature and Yanka Kupala too is no good and no one is going to read it in a few years! True literature is Russian literature." If such views are articulated by an academic professor, what can you expect from an average Belarusian, whose knowledge of Belarusian literature is limited to the compulsory school reading list of several dozen titles, pre-selected by the Ministry of Education under political censorship. Today's students, just as in Soviet times, must not read most of the best pieces of Belarusian national literature, and the Belarusian emigration literary legacy is entirely prohibited. Of course, today, the printing and distribution of such books would not pose a problem. But if in the absolute majority of schools in Belarus, Belarusian is taught for one or two academic hours per week (and primarily the theory of the language); the vast majority of my countrymen cannot even comprehend the literary works of the most gifted Belarusian authors and philosophers. You need to take extra effort to overcome the simple lack of time – and often laziness – and teach yourself the language of your ancestors.

My memory again goes back to the 1980s. Around the year 1984, a local newspaper with a not-at-all literary title, the *Chemik* (it was issued in Novopolotsk, "the city of great chemistry") published my first translations of several poems by Heinrich Heine, Adam Mickiewicz, and Vladimir Mayakovsky into Belarusian. A few weeks after the publication, I was called to the personnel department of Novopolotsk Technical University, where I worked as an assistant lecturer. I encountered a gentleman (the name eludes me now) who introduced himself as a KGB lieutenant-colonel of the Vitsyebsk oblast, responsible for "combating the manifestations of nationalism." Apparently, he considered my translations in *Chemik* such a manifestation; "Leon Petrovich," he spoke to me (of course in Russian), "you must understand that the Belarusian language has no chance to endure. It is an archaic language, and it is impossible to express any serious content in it." The comrade lieutenant-colonel was particularly troubled that I had not rendered Mayakovsky ("our proletarian poet") into Belarusian. I answered that, as linguist by profession, I had never thought that one language could be better than another. I was cautious and pretended not to understand: I was inclined to believe that lieutenant-colonel might even accept my arguments and

give up. Of course, for him that conversation was just a formality: he was carrying out his orders. A little later, during *perestroika*, I realized that the policy of denationalization in the former Soviet Union had taken a massive scale and its implementation had been well-paid; among the luckiest beneficiaries were the representatives of the "minor nations" who betrayed their identity and strived for the native language to be supplanted in offices, education, and cultural institutions by Russian (*obshcheponyatnyj*). Any attempt to confront the Russification officers, even by merely expressing disagreement on this issue, would most often land you into the GULAG or Kurapaty, especially under Stalin's rule; later, they were not infrequently sent to psychiatric facilities or, depending on the circumstances, persecuted, or "just" ridiculed.

The chances for improvement arose at the turn of the 1980s. The domestic, mostly Belarusian-speaking, cultural elite fronted the anti-communist movement; its overarching aim was to ensure independence and restore democracy in Belarus. From the very beginning, this intellectual community was actively supported by groups of the Belarusian-speaking youth of different persuasions; these groups were formed in the 1980s in Minsk and in several other major cities of Belarus: Vitebsk, Grodno, Brest, Mogilev, Novopolotsk, Orsha, and Baranovichi. The partially democratic election to the Supreme Council of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the spring of 1990 was comparatively successful for the movement, then headed by the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) with its chairman Zianon Pazniak (an art historian and archaeologist by profession). This meant that, despite a very competitive situation, two well-known Belarusian writers, Nil Hilevych and Anatol Viarchynsky, became MPs along with several less-known cultural activists, architects, painters, historians, etc. The distorted vote count did not permit the final victory of several other first-rate authors (e.g. Ryhor Baradulin, Hienadz Buraukin, Siarhiej Zakkonnikau, Artur Volski, Adam Maldzis) and painters (such as Alaksiej Marachkyn, Mikola Kupava, or Symon Svystunovych). Still, a small faction of the BPF – supported by few MPs and non-member intellectuals and labourers – managed to convince the entire Supreme Council, made up in 80 percent of the communist and economic nomenklatura, that the declaration of independence is a mandatory step in saving the Belarusian people from the external and internal threats (mainly from the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster). Shortly after, the process of

revival of the Belarusian school was underway. In the 1994–1995 school year, more than 75 percent of first grade learners in Belarus went to school with Belarusian as the language of instruction (in the Minsk Oblast it was up to about 90 percent!). There were only isolated cases of parent protests across the country (bear in mind that Belarus was home to the largest group – in percentage points compared with the rest of the Soviet Union – of servicemen and KGB officers of non-Belarusian origin, including retired officers and their families. But even then, especially after Alexander Lukashenko's successful road to the top office, Belarusian intelligentsia was blamed for... the economic crisis, which has been plaguing the country under the communist and Lukashenko's rule since the declaration of independence in 1991. Unfortunately, this propaganda would and still does bear fruit. The irritated Belarusians of the older and middle generations associate the deterioration of their living standard with the new figures that stepped onto the Belarusian political scene in the early 1990s, because they were charismatic people and their names were easily embedded in the memory thanks to the daily live broadcast of the Supreme Council sittings.

These dramatic circumstances to a large extent enabled Lukashenko, through the state-controlled Belarusian television, to convey and fossilize the popular image of the Belarusian intelligentsia as a band of rogues who, being sponsored by some imaginary Western foes (and now also Russian enemies), feed on the misery of the Belarusian people.

The regime's repressive measures are also an issue. Human rights defenders report that in the years 1995–2011 virtually every democratically-oriented writer, musician, painter, filmmaker, journalist, theater figure, or Belarusian journalist was detained for at least few days or forced to pay exorbitant – in relation to the person's and his family's income – and often ungrounded fines for taking part in protests. Unfortunately, an average Belarusian knows little, if anything, about it and often concludes, "Why do they do it? They should keep quiet as I do." Such people's own cowardice is seen as a rational attitude: they will sooner say that they support Lukashenko's policy (although often not really identify with it) than publicly demonstrate the support for people having a dissenting voice. An equally common attitude is seen in treating cultural activists as freeloaders whom "I have to support from my wages." What is then the answer to the question of whether the Belarusian intelligentsia is to blame for the attitude of many

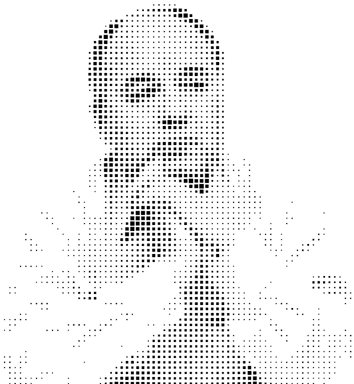
of its fellow citizens? Certainly yes – a different attitude of the Belarusian society is impossible. The intelligentsia is responsible for having neglected the networking and forging of strong links with various civil society centres in Belarus, and for having been too individualistic, or even in love with itself. Some writers and artists thought of creating works of art as their first and only business, and even holding university diplomas, they never worked with and taught young people the Belarusian language.

Today, we are struggling with the consequences of all this. In present-day Belarus, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu would only have a theoretical chance to be elected next president.

The other conclusion drawn from these observations is as follows: the Belarusian intelligentsia must now struggle and work simultaneously, and this is an overly demanding, though surmountable task. At least, this is what I want to believe.

LAVON BARSHCHEUSKI

The most burning issue of the Belarusian cultural community is the politicization of their activity. Surely, this is done by force and against their will.



EUROPEAN *ANGELOLOGIA* – BELARUSIAN REALITY

MARIUSZ MASZKIEWICZ – INTERVIEW

Paweł Laufer: You worked for many years in Belarus as a diplomat. What do you think is the most critical factor that determines Belarusian culture and the third sector?

Mariusz Maszkiewicz: The main determining factor is the political situation in Belarus. Added to this, and no less important, is an array of phenomena that affect the development of Belarusian culture, including the actors that contribute to this culture. Roughly speaking, ever since Lukashenko rose to power, culture has been following the official course, which is very circumspect about asking questions that are the most vital for the state and the Belarusian people, and the independent course. Hence, the temptation to liken this situation to the Poland of the 1980s with its independent culture and artists boycotting the official media. But this analogy is not good.

Certainly, many worthy culture-makers exist outside the official course. They are not to be seen in the media: they are hardly ever mentioned in the official press, you cannot spot them on TV. This mainly concerns painting and underground music with its youngest, rock generation. Had it not been for the support of international organizations and Belarusian NGOs,

they would not have been able to sustain and create quite a meaningful content and message, both in the local Belarusian dimension and outside.

P.L.: But what is so specific about the Belarusian reality that actually no parallel can be drawn with the Polish situation of the 1980s?

M.M.: First, these are different experiences. In the post-Soviet area, we did not experience any independent cultural movement, or dissident movement. It was marginal and surfacing only in major cities. Culture was only verging on political activity, which was aimed to broaden the domain of civil liberties. The Soviet Union also had its independent creators. There are a few names, for instance, singers; they were extremely popular, thought of as independent, and not too visible in the public media: Vysotsky, Okudzhava.

Still, Belarus was exposed to the process of creating the "Soviet man." Those people, who have been brought in droves from their small towns to large industrial centres, were fed the common Soviet culture. The Moscow or Leningrad cinema, music, or theatre were also admired in Minsk. It was even felt that Belarusians were ashamed of their rural and folk culture, and believed that whatever they might like to say was valueless. Despite the fact that official institutions promoted the output of folk artists.

After 1990, this was a reference point for many young people; it was the moment seen as a springboard for other sources of inspiration to be found in a broader European or global context. Only few succeeded. This culture that we are dealing with now is rather regional, known in Belarus and other post--Soviet countries, and on the borderlands. It has little or no noteworthy legacy that would be known. There is no Belarusian author who would get the Nobel Prize. Still, at least in literature, there are individuals that have managed to make names for themselves: Svetlana Alekseevich, Vasyl Bykau or Vladimir Orlov. Thanks to the Polish-Belarussian cooperation, a whole generation of young artists have come to the fore. Probably the best example is Andrej Chadanovich.

Art is closely linked to politics. The process of building a nation and its identity is far from effortless in Belarus. The main reason for the arising difficulties is Sovietization, both in everyday life and in high culture. The Russian language is prevailing. Clichéd as it may be, it cannot be overlooked when talking about the nature of Belarusian culture. People who speak Belarusian are invariably treated as an opposition. Their speech is a declaration of opinion. Language is a form of self-presentation.

P.L.: How do you assess the situation today compared with what you found when you were posted in Belarus? The cooperation at the cultural, institutional and non-governmental level, at the Polish-Belarusian level, was only fledgling. How do you assess that cooperation and the options available yesterday and today?

M.M.: The problem here are some unresolved historical issues in the Polish-Belarusian relations. For a large number of Belarusians, especially in the western part of the country, Poland was a state of high culture, often imposed on the Belarusians dwelling in the former Republic of Poland. Belarus was the arena of two colliding cultural worlds – Polish and Russian, which created tensions or even competition. It is widely known that the 19th century Dunin-Martsinkyevich's theatre was in a sense a political idea of countering the tsarist regime by highlighting the "local dimension" and otherness; it attempted to talk about how different the Belarusians are from the Moskals, and that they do not want to yield to the new order and have their own vernacular, tradition and heritage.

In order to disentangle from the historical patterns in the Polish-Belarusian relations after the regaining of independence in 1991, Poland, having renewed the official and unofficial contacts, began to work through social organizations, local self-governments, the Polish Institute, the consular offices and the embassy. It seems quite productive, yet with variable success. The cooperation is mainly based on attempts to expose the contemporary Polish culture and the culture of the Polish-Belarusian borderland with a view to inspiring and seeking shared areas.

Since that time, several appealing projects have been conceived. For example, the Basovishcha rock festival, or the festival of Belarusian culture in Bialystok, which blends the Belarusian and local Bialystok cultural heritage. These two events, taking place on the Polish side of the Polish-Belarusian border, were in a sense competitive. On the one hand, this is an official pro-state event, financed by the Belarusian Social and Cultural Society in Poland; on the other, it attracts students of Belarusian origin and the independent Basovishcha fans. The Belarusian side have also managed to launch a number of events in the theatre, music, media, and literature; there are also pockets of Polish presence that inspire Belarusian artists. Hence, such present-day magazines as *Arche*, *pARTizan* or several others that arise from the need to

embed the Belarusian identity in European culture. I think this is a distinctive feature of the Polish-Belarusian cooperation that has been working its way up over the past two decades, despite problems and obstacles.

Nevertheless, the process of de-Belarusization of schools and state cultural institutions causes even greater frustration among culture-makers. We are witnessing a massive wave of emigration. No wonder, Vasyl Bykau spent the last years of his life in the West. Svetlana Alekseyevich also stays most of her time away from Belarus. Many writers are made to seek such projects that would help them create; they find such opportunities in Poland, Lithuania, and in farther in Western Europe.

P.L.: Speaking of the outflow of the Belarusian intelligentsia, don't you think that it does not correspond to the same process in Ukraine? Ukrainian emigrants endorse and initiate processes that influence the country from abroad. Ukrainian intellectuals in Toronto are, in many respects, what the Parisian *Culture* used to be for Poland. Do you think that Belarus has such a discernible group away from home?

M.M.: Ukrainian émigrés formed a strong community as early as in the post-war times. The huge number of Ukrainians living in Germany or North America built their islands of identity. In the 1940s and 1950s, they had their university in Munich and later in the USA and Canada. Those groups of Ukrainian intelligentsia had enormous influences, which can be seen in Ukrainian historiography. To illustrate the point, take the output of the young generation of historians, such as Ryabchuk or Hrycak.

By contrast, Belarusian emigration was relatively weak. The Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania and Poland did not have such a powerful and creative élite. Therefore, I think that the comparison to Giedroyc is not quite accurate. The Polish case is truly unique. It is very rare that ideas generated in exile by a relatively small group of intellectuals and artists were grafted onto the motherland. The Parisian *Culture* is the exception that proves the rule; it has no equivalent in any émigré communities originating in Eastern and Central Europe.

As regards any cultural impact on Belarus from outside, Poland seems to play the most pivotal role. I am thinking about the Bialystok community. Their brainchildren are the *Czasopis* monthly, book series, Sokrat Janovych's activity, or scientific journals.

Backed by some Polish professors, Giedroyc tried to create a strong university facility in Bialystok, yet with somewhat disappointing results. It turned out not at all simple, and the process must be scheduled over many years.

Bialystok has lesser impact on Belarus than Lublin, although both are extremely important. This is evident in many projects that occur on the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borderlands.

P.L.: What are in your opinion some past and present hurdles in Belarusian cooperation with Poland and other European Union countries? Of course, the political aspect is obvious. Do you think Belarusians have such a level of trust that allows good cooperation? Do Belarusians feel connected with Europe?

M.M.: The Belarus people feel Europeans and there is no doubt about this. Over the last twenty years, despite major impediments, they have managed to put together and sort out their historical and cultural heritage, which makes them feel so.

Predominantly, the three main pillars are highlighted of the Belarusian identity and their European historical identity. The first pillar is associated with statehood and law. Take the Statutes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; this document is among the Belarusians' historical attainments. There is a dispute with Lithuania about this document, but also about who should claim this part of the legacy.

The second pillar is the great province of religious culture, i.e. all that is derived from the legacy of Francis Skaryna – the Bible in Belarusian and the growth of three major Christian churches in Belarus: the Greek Catholic, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox. This process is discernible even today in the Orthodox Church. This Belarusization, which is very slow and grassroots indeed, but does exist, is visible and noticed even by the Moscow Patriarchate. Such is the policy of the current Metropolitan Filaret. There is also a substantial influence of the late Cardinal Swiatek who worked hard to reshape the opinion that the Roman Catholic Church should only be associated with Polishness. This is a great achievement of the Catholic Church, which was made possible (as if by paradox) by the great Polish patriot Cardinal Swiatek.

The third pillar of Belarusian culture is associated with secular literature. I will give you an example: I have recently published the *Belarusian Tristan*

in collaboration with philologists from Minsk (it is available on-line on the Komunikat website; it is a web-based library created by a group of local culture-makers in Bialystok). This is a Belarusian translation of the old legend of Tristan. There is a manuscript now kept in Poznan dated to the late 17^{th} century, probably made in some court office. The *Belarusian Tristan* points to the roots of Belarusian culture and testifies to its deep-rooting in European culture.

Well, Belarusians do not have to prove that they are Europeans at all costs. These are very important reference points for them.

The most burning issue of the Belarusian cultural community is the politicization of their activity. This is done by force and against their will. Many of them did not want to be "political." They wanted to avoid political disputes and debates, but the process of Russification or re-Sovietization of the last fifteen years has caused these artists to resist and turn to the opposition and activity independent from the official ideology and authorities.

Poland and Western countries back up such an activity. Much of the funding comes both from various external sources and from Belarus. It was earmarked for the activities of NGOs, independent organizations, and the non-governmental sector. Consequently, artists were, say, automatically deprived of the state patronage. And this is the problem of politicization of independent artists who would willingly and without resistance benefit from the state patronage, but they are, regrettably, cast aside by the official system because of the Belarusian language and axiology, which is inimical to the state ideology.

P.L.: I would like to ask your opinion about the recent events related to the provision by the Polish justice of information on bank accounts of independent Belarusian activists. You say that this is the tip of the iceberg.[1]

M.M.: Yes. Mainly because this process, much to the indignation of many Belarusian and Polish bodies, has been continuing for many years. We are witnessing courts and law enforcement agencies taking action against people accused by the Belarusian authorities of illegal acts; these people have been

1 In August 2011, the Polish prosecutor's office disclosed to the Belarusian investigators information on bank accounts owned by Belarusian opposition activists, which eventuated in repressive measures.

forced to flee Belarus, threatened with persecution for independent activity, or support for independent organizations and opposition parties. They are wanted and sought out internationally and incarcerated: it was already the case in the 1990s, and their future was entirely hinged on the individual judgement and discrimination of judges and prosecutors. Most of the cases ended well. At this time, I have no recollection of all the names of those who have fallen into this trap of international legal cooperation; at times, it happened that many of them spent many weeks or months in a Polish jail, awaiting the decision of Polish courts. There is a commonly known case of Mr Zukowiec; in his case, the documents sent from Belarus were proven to have been distorted during translation. And there was a long history of unfounded and absurd allegations against Stanislaw Bujnicki from Grodno. The story of Ales Bialecki is such a tip of the iceberg. And it is not a question of malevolence on the Polish side, but rather some institutional inertia. By entering the agreement on legal assistance and seeking the assistance of the Belarusian state institutions, Poland wanted to improve the collaboration among the judiciary. I remember that even a decade ago the legal cooperation of both states was thought as model. In most cases, it covered the state protection and the prosecution of criminal offences. The Belarusian authorities have taken advantage of that positive cooperation and have initiated prosecution against people who should have never been charged.

P.L.: Minister Sikorski spoke about dismissing the prosecutor responsible for the disclosure of information, and about amending the law so that only the general prosecutor's office could provide such data. What do you think about the response of the Polish side? What can they do to help with this situation?

M.M.: The idea of limited collaboration with the official state institutions in the Polish-Lithuanian, or Lithuanian-Belarusian relations was conceived in the late 1990s in response to the deteriorating condition of Belarusian democracy and the subordination of public institutions to one person – the president. That limited collaboration, referred to by Czeslaw Bielecki as a dual game, assumed that contacts should be maintained up to some political level, while not compromising a certain system of values and a considerable Polish activity in relationship-building with the public. It was also about

backing independent culture, promoting democracy and the values that are the dearest to us all in Poland. This dual game seemed workable for some time. The clash over the Association of Poles in Belarus in 2005 and constant human rights violations in Belarus showed that some areas of cooperation begin to alarmingly overlap and their separation became more complex. For a number of years, the Polish authorities have been forced to remodel this practice, unfortunately to the detriment of the cooperation with independent groups. The flow of aid to independent institutions in Belarus has not been interrupted, but the opposition circles report more and more problems. This is not only a matter of institutions of the wider culture, but also such that are engaged in building a civic and democratic Belarus. This is a very important issue, since very often culture can hardly be separated from politics. This issue reveals yet another geopolitical problem. In the opinion of many Belarusian opposition politicians, isolating Belarus from cooperation with the West advantages Russia. The prospect of shattering the official links between Warsaw and Minsk, Vilnius and Minsk, or Minsk and Brussels, provokes their anxiety. The vacuum will be filled by someone else. They are afraid of Russification and Belarus' subordination to Moscow. They are convinced that the Russian strategy is aimed to bring about situations in which the Western partners of Belarus dissociate themselves from it. How is the Polish minister or prime minister going to sort it out – it is a good question. Yet, I think that regardless of the current political situation in our country, and no matter who wields power, it is a rather long process and a long trip in which we are forced to carefully manoeuvre among the rocks.

P.L.: How do you assess the development opportunities for independent culture and NGOs in Belarus?

M.M.: Fortunately, culture-makers, besides financial support and ability to participate in international projects, can do without state patronage and protection. An artist who paints, composes, or writes books does it mostly at home and within the wherewithal that they have at their disposal. They do not need a minister or a department director in order to create. I believe that there is a whole range of instruments that can be used by the West, regardless of the existing legal and political situation. I am talking about financial support and enabling artists' participation in joint EU projects.

This is how the Eastern Partnership project was intended to help. I am downhearted indeed that it does not function as it was originally envisaged and planned. At the outset, it was assumed that we would capitalize on our experience with, for example, Ukraine (e.g. the Know How Foundation dissolved in 2004). We thought that we might just unlock our state and European funds, win the commitment of NGOs and cultural institutions, and seriously claim the different areas of social activity. It worked out well with Ukraine for many years and the events of 2004 in Maydan Square were in a sense the aftermath of the activity of Polish NGOs that, after all, operated without any substantial financial support from the Polish state.

P.L.: Speaking of the designing of the European Partnership project, what were the preliminary assumptions and what were the objectives to be met by Belarus?

M.M.: This question is a bit tricky. Approaches varied across people and institutions. I remember the ideas in the ministry about the necessity of preparing a general and concise document for setting the overall political framework that the EU and its agencies would fill in by their institutional strength. Thus, from the viewpoint of the movers and shakers, it was about proposing a vague project and confining it to the EU's institutional machinery. It appeared that it did not work and that some strong moderators are needed, assisted by robust institutions, clear-cut partnership programmes and budgets. I imagined that this role of moderators will fall to NGOs, not only Polish but also Czech, or Lithuanian. Those from the eastern part of the European Union that have first-hand experience with Ukraine, Belarus and the Caucasus. I am disenchanted because there seemed to be no stimulus, concept or maybe courage to entrust the Eastern Partnership to such moderators who could shoulder this burden and step into the shoes of national and EU institutions. Meanwhile, many NGOs complain about insufficient information and that state institutions fail to provide them with the needed instruments.

P.L.: What steps do you think Poland and the European Union should take to improve this situation?

M.M.: I think NGOs should press Polish and EU public institutions much harder. The institutions responsible for the Eastern Partnership should identify

the tools and methods conducive to the implementation of the overall partnership objectives, and propose mechanisms by which Belarusians too could have recourse to external funding. So far, we have been dealing with something that one of the NGO activists called "angelology," where we talk about the "heavenly spheres," big politics, but without any specifics.

As far as the Polish institutions are concerned, their involvement in endorsing Belarusian culture may be primarily founded on local self-governments and, to a lesser extent, on non-state actors. A helping hand for Belarusian artists is surely their participation in various projects with Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, or other EU countries. If only possible, we should explore and generate such possibilities on our own and enlist the involvement of Belarusian artists. For them, it means a lot; it is an attempt to go outside their environment and juxtapose what they do at home with what is done across Europe.

From the EU perspective, the problem is broader. The EU of today needs to face its own problems – not only the financial slowdown, but also the development. As you gaze at Brussels as the centre of a uniting Europe, it seems that we are increasingly focused only on ourselves. They talk about the need to resolve the EU's internal problems and that the resources are too scarce to extend generosity outside. In Poland, we look at Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova as the members-to-be of the European Union, as the fringe states that will be increasingly drawn into the area of a united Europe (politically and economically). Yet, for many Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards or Italians, this idea is totally unreal and regarded more as a burden than an as added value. I experienced that when raising funds for the Belsat TV project. Walking door-to-door across various European institutions, soliciting the support for the free media in Belarus, I often heard questions asked off-the-record that I found really difficult to answer: "But why? Let them live as they want. They want Lukashenko – it is their business. They want Russia – leave them alone. Does it matter whether they have a European identity?" As if Belarusians were really in a position to decide it; they have not been able to do it for many years because they have been deprived of free election. From the distant perspective of the western part of the EU, all this is really less important. The EU struggles with its own problems and looks at Belarus and Ukraine as it does at Morocco, Algeria, or Libya. However, from the Polish viewpoint, we point out that the former are countries of the European legacy and have their share in our landscape. They are not just neighbours of Europe, but European countries and they deserve more of the European solidarity.

BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT CULTURE: AN ATTEMPT AT DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

Belarusian cultural space is so differentiated and self-contradictory that the single right interpretation or evaluation seems virtually impossible. Many believe that there is no Belarusian culture. Is it the problem of the culture itself, or of an observer who fails to notice the culture just because it is not present in general trends and, consequently, in broadcasts?

"Do you notice Belarusian culture?" This is the question that I would like to ask a stranger in the street. Even if this person answers "no," her or his confidence can be shattered by a well-known phrase: "You may not notice it, but it is there."

Our experts discuss the reasons for this "invisibility" of Belarusian independent culture, trying to make a differential diagnosis. They decide which vaccine and medicine it should receive and whether it has any favorable prognosis, so that we would know if the patient is rather dead than alive or rather alive than dead.

The experts, who are the demiurges of contemporary Belarusian culture, present their views from different angles, and this gives us a chance to get a comprehensive clinical picture.

TACIANA NIADBAY



VALIANTSIN AKUDOVICH

PHILOSOPHER, ESSAYIST, LITERARY CRITIC. HE IS WIDELY KNOWN FOR HIS CONCEPT OF "BEING ABSENT."

WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE" MEAN TO YOU?

First of all, I interpret this term as an active culture, by which I mean its creative activity in the struggle with the formal culture, legalized by the government's political discourse. Based on that, one can state that *independent* culture is the only culture in modern Belarus. My hypothesis is, obviously, too radical to be objective about all other contexts of culture, even if some of those contexts are close to the state. In many spheres, such as design or symphonic music, it is virtually impossible to make a distinction between "dependent" and "independent" culture.

HOW WOULD YOU TREAT THE INDEPENDENT CULTURE IN BELARUS? WHAT HINDERS OR FOSTERS ITS DEVELOPMENT?

I am not sure there is a universal answer to this question. *Independent* culture reveals itself in various genres and forms. As they say, it's feast or famine. For instance, Belarusian poetry is a rich and dynamic area of culture. It survives despite repressive attention of the state or even more repressive indifference of the society. The theater, however (except for the Free Theater), has not entered the space of *independent* culture, at least not as a phenomenon.

Rather than evaluating the whole discourse of independent culture, one should evaluate the problems and perspectives of a phenomenon exclusively in a particular context. As for the discourse as a whole, its only problem is its own *independence,* and its only perspective is to lose this *independence* to become a "normal" culture.

What are the most interesting and promising trends of Belarusian independent culture? What is lacking? What could bring positive changes?

Independent culture of Belarus is a unique phenomenon. For years of existence, it has created many educational, research, and expert institutions that have worked fruitfully for many years. Look at the variety of newspapers, magazines, almanacs, publishing houses, educational communities, literary and intellectual communities… it would take too long to name them all.

Belarusian national mentality emerged for the first time in Belarusian *independent* culture discourse. An even more noteworthy achievement was the reformatting of national historiography, which conceptually changed the approach of Belarusians to their history.

A new Belarusian literature that differs significantly by its nature and quality from the previous literary works could emerge only in the framework of *independent* culture. One of the unexpected results of this movement is an "explosion" of translated literature.

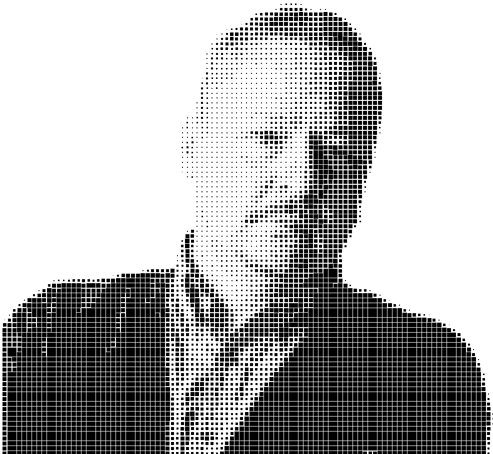
Rock music deserves a special attention as well, since in the '90s it contributed to the awakening of Belarusian national identity not less than Wagner's operas contributed once to the national identity of Germans…

I will stop here to have more time for other things. Generally speaking, *independent* culture has rehabilitated the *whole* Belarusian culture within the years of independence. New times are around the corner, the times when the achievements of *independent* culture will serve as a basis for a new national culture. Until then, this kind of culture needs to be supported, since it is not a self-sustainable commercial mass culture. With the government at war with national culture, where can one find this support? Anywhere. Though, as scientists say, the answer to this question is outside my sphere of competence.

WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO THE CHANGES IN BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT CULTURE THAT TOOK PLACE DURING THE LAST TWENTY YEARS? WHAT EVENT, SITUATION OR PERSONALITY SURPRISED YOU OR IMPRESSED YOU THE MOST?

Naturally, many things have changed throughout so many years. The romantic euphoria, which filled everyone's hearts involved in the renaissance of Belarusian culture, is long over. The term "national" has lost its initial intrinsic imperativeness. I am talking about a well-known triad: the language, distinct culture and heroicized history. With the passage of time, radical nationalism got marginalized, while Belarusian centralism took its place. Belarusian centralism is distinguished by just two quite abstract constants: freedom and sentiment to the one's country. The discourse of "independent Belarusian culture" lost its strictness and integrity, but at the same time it gained support from those parts of Belarusian society that were previously scared away by national radicalism. So, *independent* culture in Belarus exists in two specific formats: "Belarusian" and "Russian." Not without a change, though. Some time ago, Russian-speaking Belarusian enthusiasts regarded themselves as part of Russian cultural environment. Nowadays, most of them think of themselves as bearers of discourse of *independent* Belarusian culture, meaning the Russian-language version of it. This conceptual change is very important.

As for the second part of your question, I am impressed first of all by our ability to maintain (though not without losses) the discourse of *independent* Belarusian culture in the conditions of total repressions exercised by the dictatorship for already twenty years. I even came up with a toast to illustrate my enthusiasm: "To discourse defenders!" Me and my friends always raise our glasses to this toast on Freedom Day. Isn't our tenacity of life worth a strong drink?



MIKALAI KHALEZIN

PLAYWRIGHT, JOURNALIST, DIRECTOR AND ARTIST; DIRECTOR AND ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE BELARUS FREE THEATER.

WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE" MEAN TO YOU?

There is no "independent culture" in the civilized world. The "dependence" in our context means trivial reliance on outside help and, as a result, total or partial subordination to the government. Taking into account that we have dictatorship, this dependence becomes a rigid ideological barrier. Attempts to overcome this barrier are punished with funding denials, employment bans or with a trivial pressure that may take different forms.

In the civilized world, the state, even if it fully covers the financial needs of artistic groups, has no right to intervene in the creative process. Therefore, it is hardly appropriate to talk about real "dependence" or "independence" there. For example, there are two types of theaters in Sweden: state-owned and independent. The government financially supports all of them. The only difference is that "independent" theaters do not get government contracts. There is obviously a terminological gap between us and democratic countries. We use the language of non-free societies. Currently, I use this term to describe some community of creative persons in Belarus who can work ignoring ideological directives imposed by authorities.

Let me make my position clear: I do not fully understand what "culture" means, that's why I use the term "arts" more often. "Culture" is something too comprehensive and, therefore, too incomprehensible for me.

HOW CAN YOU EVALUATE OR TRY TO DIAGNOSE THE PRESENT STATE-INDEPENDENT CULTURE IN BELARUS? WHAT HINDERS OR FOSTERS ITS DEVELOPMENT? WHAT HAPPENS TO US, FROM THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE, HERE AND NOW?

I think that the process is hindered by the one and only problem, which is the problem of art education. Art cannot move forward in a closed space. Artists have to be aware of things that were created before them and know what is going on in the world right now. Any lag in art education throws us back for decades.

We need discussion platforms where people will discuss contemporary art trends. We need experimental theaters and artistic labs. We need master classes of international stars and world's leading experts. We don't have anything like that now. The history of contemporary art, taught in Belarusian universities, ends in the second half of the 20th century. All newer trends are present in a fragmentary way or not present at all. I encountered this problem when I headed the Center of Contemporary Arts. And, I face it nowadays, when I am into the theater.

When we attempted to enlarge our troupe, we tried to work with different Belarusian actors. All of them had problems with their training, both on practical and theoretical levels. Therefore, three years ago we decided to start our own artistic lab and train theater specialists who would be compatible with our requirements and world standards. As a result, five students are ready to represent the theater on the most recognized stages of the world. I believe that for artists today the only way to promote culture is to take care about their own education, since the state has abandoned this function.

WHAT ARE THE MOST INTERESTING AND PROMISING TRENDS OF BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT CULTURE? WHAT IS LACKING? WHAT COULD BRING POSITIVE CHANGES?

I'll risk repeating myself. I am convinced that only the change of attitude to education can bring changes. Even the problem of funding is secondary. Belarusian art at large does not offer an innovative product. Therefore, we cannot state that it exists in the global context. We have at best one or two

competitive products in each area of art, which is a miserable number for a 10-million nation. It means that Belarusian art is non-existent in the world.

One needs to create logistics for the sphere of arts. A well-designed logistical chain can bring positive results even in the conditions of dictatorship. We have an acute problem of art management, which is also caused by the lack of training. Belarusian gallerists possess no knowledge of how the global art market works. Performing art managers don't know how to promote their artists outside Belarus. Producers are unaware of the quality of the product they are promoting… At the same time, there are many talented people among managers, and these people are able to learn all the subtleties of the global art market.

We teach in different countries. What surprises me every time is that European and American students, who are not more talented than Belarusians, achieve much higher results. It isn't much of a secret: they live in the constant flow of novelties concerning their interests. Their educational programs attract all outstanding experts in the area of their interests. So, the changes take moments, not years.

What is your attitude to changes in Belarusian independent culture that took place during the last twenty years? What event, situation or personality surprised you or impressed you most of all?

The situation deteriorates in virtually all areas of art. This is the effect of mass emigration of serious talented musicians, artists and writers. The quality criteria have eroded. The system of values has been deformed. Still, there are some people that try to limit the damage by keeping up to higher standards on the international level.

I wouldn't say that someone in Belarus has really impressed me recently. I get inspired mostly by other countries' nationals. Among those who do not lower their criteria of quality and remain trend setters in their areas, I am really happy for Sergey Mikhalok and Zhenya Kalmykov whose Lyapis Trubetskoy follows a very true course. They don't restrain themselves and, at the same time, they don't lose self-control. I am following Ivan Kirchuk's

Troitsa for several years, and I see that they maintain high standards. They are members of European folk music elites. The laboriousness of Volodya Tsesler and his level of creativity serve as an example for artists, designers, and graphics, both in Belarus and in Europe. Andrei Khadanovich and Alhierd Bacharevic are the recently most interesting names in literature.

There is a number of young musicians, writers, and artists who have already made their statements, but are unknown in the international context yet. It would be very important to get this international recognition, not just for their personal satisfaction, but for any radical changes to take place in Belarus.



ULADZIMIR MATSKEVICH

METHODOLOGIST, PHILOSOPHER, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES AGENCY. FIELDS OF INTEREST: SYSTEMIC MENTAL ACTIVITY, CULTURAL POLICY.

WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENT CULTURE OF BELARUS" MEAN TO YOU?

I actually don't use this term, because it doesn't make much sense to me. Culture consists of norms, prototypes, patterns, models, and standards. It is a configuration of interrelated elements: explicit and implicit, ideational and tangible. Every realization is dependent on ideal design, on what we think is "ideal." Every piece of art may approach the "ideal" for an unlimited number of times, but it will never become ideal, because one can only think of or imagine the ideal. With artists, authors, actors – all those who "make

culture" or create objects and cultural events, it is quite a different matter. Creators must be independent of anything or anybody except the ideals and values they think or dream about.

How can you evaluate or try to diagnose the present state-independent culture in Belarus? What hinders or fosters its development? What is happening to us here and now from the cultural perspective?

Globalization exposes all local, indigenous, national cultures to a huge pressure from mass culture, which is portrayed as universal common culture. It is allegedly for everyone, yet – for no one. In this sense, Belarusian culture is dependent, but this way it really does not stand our as either better or worse among all others. There is another aspect of dependency, from which Belarusian culture suffers, that is, Belarusian artists tend to pick norms, patterns, ideals, etc. from outside rather than from inside modern Belarus or Belarusian culture. When I say "from outside," I mean both geographical (Russia, America, Europe) and temporal (from the past, from tradition) dimensions. This dependency of artists on external models and trends, which may be local but are still archaic, makes them epigones that are of no interest not only to their contemporaries but even to themselves. Thus, the development of culture either grinds to a halt or takes place somewhere else, leaving us with just second-hand leftovers of this development.

Fortunately, the situation is slowly changing. However, we are not yet used to appreciate our own achievements more than external ones. We are yet to learn to value of the present over the past or at least to appreciate both of them equally.

So far, we content ourselves with secondary culture and heritage, and we are at the very start of the creation of native and contemporary culture of our own.

What are the most interesting and promising trends of Belarusian independent culture? What is lacking? What could bring positive changes?

The most important positive trend is that contemporary artists increasingly turn to our own (Belarusian and modern) norms, patterns, and ideals, giving them the status of etalons and prototypes. They get rid of old stereotypes such as that one should either "keep up with the Johnsons" of follow local archaic patterns. Meanwhile, this trend is only characteristic of few Belarusian artists and is yet to become popular with the consumers of culture and art. Sadly, consumers still follow the "keep up with the Johnsons" pattern and choose either Russian or European products, barely noticing their own Belarusian trends. And when they notice something local, they do it only to check if it is really compatible with external standards.

Belarusian culture falls short of qualified consumers and users: readers, viewers, and listeners. We lack both mainstream and elite consumers.

The situation can change for the better only when artists and consumers will pay attention to each other and will focus jointly on the burning and painful topics, on the stories and characters of modern Belarus.

How can you evaluate the changes in the independent culture of Belarus over the past twenty years? What event, situation or personality has impressed or surprised you the most?

I will not enumerate events, artistic works or personalities. Let me try to formulate it this way:

– In the early '90s, local culture (objects, artistic works, personalities, events) was hardly there, so one had to seek it out, not always successfully.

– Afterwards, it became much more visible. One could view and read everything and visit all the events.

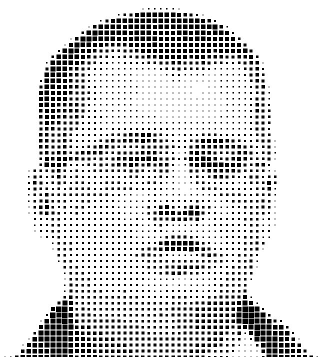
– Then, it increased even more. The quantitative increase in Belarusian local culture was so huge that one had to regret not being able to view, read, listen to everything or make it everywhere.

– Finally, qualitative changes became visible. Unable to follow all new things in Belarusian culture, one came to the understanding that there were many unworthy things. If at the beginning we appreciated and respected anything that was Belarusian, later we became able to choose from the best, rejecting kitschy, low-quality and simply boring things.

– Levels, niches and segments emerged in Belarusian culture, meeting various requirements and tastes.

NOTES IN THE MARGINS

Only one: Realizing that there are a lot of things in Belarusian culture, one should not make someone's personal taste the sole criteria of culture or the level of culture.



SEVIARYN KVIATKOUSKI

WRITER, JOURNALIST, BLOGGER, MANAGER OF CULTURAL PROJECTS. COORDINATOR OF WWW.BUDZMA.ORG

WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE" MEAN TO YOU?

In a free country, culture can only be financially independent. In a non-free country, culture can be free, first of all, from dictatorship or "black lists." In Belarus, free culture can exist only in some small niches that stay untouched by the government, such as a few bookstores, a few galleries and, naturally, the Internet. As long as uncensored art confines itself to a small semi-closed circle, it poses no threat to the dictator's ideological departments.

The situation with Lyapis Trubetskoy is a recent representative example. The band was known all around Belarus for its harmless ironic lyrical love songs. Then, they introduced allusions or even direct description of current

human rights situation in Belarus into their songs, while their front-man Sergei Mikhalok started criticizing in his interviews the dictatorial nature of the current Belarusian regime. As a result, Lyapis Trubetskoy were banned from performing in Belarus and their songs were removed from radio and TV broadcasts.

However, personally for me, the notion of Belarusian independent culture has other meanings as well. I still feel sad that when we were preparing the launch of the *Buzma Belarusami. Shaliony Narod* animation film, I didn't manage to convince some of my colleagues that the presence of Piotr Masherov (a Belarusian Communist Party leader in the 1970–80s) in the film was not mandatory. It is, however, impossible to imagine the history of the post-Soviet period without the personalities of Uladzimir Karatkevich and Vasil Bykau. De-Sovietization is very important for independent Belarusian culture. A refined aesthete might admire Maksim Tank's lyric. Still, one has to remember that the poet also was a party functionary. The history of Belarusian literature (arts, music) should be presented in the context of the epoch.

Thus, at least in my perception, contemporary independent culture should have no connection with Soviet ideology (in fact, Lukashenko's ideology is a continuation of Soviet ideology in the form of farce). Then, one can analyze whether a literary work is Belarus-centric, or cosmopolitan, or totally abstract from the realities.

HOW CAN YOU EVALUATE OR TRY TO DIAGNOSE THE PRESENT STATE-INDEPENDENT CULTURE IN BELARUS? WHAT HINDERS OR FOSTERS ITS DEVELOPMENT? WHAT IS HAPPENING TO US HERE AND NOW FROM THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE?

Here is my diagnosis: artists look for options in order to earn a living. Art remains a hobby for most of them. Scholarships and grants from foreign foundations allow some authors to find personal artistic fulfillment and to earn a living at the same time. Some sell their works abroad. At any rate, all independent artists are deprived of the opportunity of reaching out to wider circles of consumers through the mass media. The cultural perspective is inseparable from the perspective of the whole society. Masterpieces can

be created not only in a closed space, but even on an unpopulated island. Only some Belarusian artistic figures are better known abroad than at home. In the first place this applies to artists, film directors, and composers whose work does not depend on the language.

Independent culture, just like the supporters of an independent society, is in a great need of external assistance. Without this support, the choice is limited: emigration or "writing for the drawer."

What are the most interesting and promising trends of Belarusian independent culture? What is lacking? What could bring positive changes?

Probably, they need visas and money to fund their travels. Belarusian artists should be part of the all-European context. There is something profoundly wrong in the situation when a respected Polish literary critic learns about modern literature in Belarus only in 2005. Nevertheless, Belarusians have no opportunities to present themselves abroad, because it takes a lot of effort to travel even to neighboring Poland. The society itself could change for the better if the culture was in demand. Every year, dozens of thousand active and creative people leave Belarus. On the other hand, nobody prevents the Belarusian writer Alhierd Bacharevic who lives in Germany from writing in Belarusian and translating his works into German.

There is yet another peculiarity. Formerly, Belarus lacked culture managers; today many artists have turned into managers. However, the strengthening of the dictatorship, the political and economic regress puts everyone at the edge of survival.

How can you evaluate the changes in the independent culture of Belarus over the past twenty years? What event, situation or personality has impressed or surprised you the most?

Twenty years ago, the independent culture of Belarus became legalized. That culture, however, was limited to around three bands, or five writers,

or a dozen of painters... Within twenty years, it has grown into so many interesting artists that it is physically impossible to follow all of them. What surprises me is that now, just like twenty years back, they stay in the back seat compared to those at power. Due to blocked information channels, there is no succession. Every generation starts the circle anew.



MARIA MARTYSEVICH

POETESS, TRANSLATOR, JOURNALIST. DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON OF PEN CENTER.

WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE" MEAN TO YOU?

I use this term as an antonym of "official, pro-government culture." By saying so, I mean free alternative theaters, non-state (private) publishing houses, public literary associations like the Union of Writers led by Pashkevich and PEN Center, artists who exhibit themselves in the "Y" Gallery. As for photography, I should mention the "Zniata" Gallery, for instance. Finally, I am talking about several non-state print media that cover culture – *Novy Chas, 34Mag*, *Nasha Niva* and various initiatives like the *pARTizan* magazine, the on-line magazine of translated literature *PrajdziSvet*, etc.

HOW CAN YOU EVALUATE OR TRY TO DIAGNOSE THE PRESENT STATE-INDEPENDENT CULTURE IN BELARUS? WHAT HINDERS OR FOSTERS ITS DEVELOPMENT? WHAT IS HAPPENING TO US HERE AND NOW FROM THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE?

In the general sense, an artist is by definition an independent subject. Nevertheless, for the process of creation, an artist needs an institution – a gallery, a publishing house, etc. I have enumerated some institutions that were founded as a response to certain artistic challenges. This is a kind of self-organization, which is extremely natural for artistic work as such. In Belarus, all of them represent a ghetto, which on the surface is ignored by the state. But, in fact, this ghetto exists only because of the state policy in the cultural field. The state wants to form everybody up, to count them, to separate the right from the wrong and lead them in the same direction. However, that leading is exactly what destroys art. We witnessed that during the epoch of socialist realism in the USSR. One can be totally free inside this ghetto, but no one is allowed to cross its borders. As a result, a Belarusian artist's psychology becomes the one of a ghetto prisoner. I think this "ghettoization" is the main problem of independent culture in Belarus. There are only two scenarios: to destroy the walls of the cultural ghetto, or to end up in the cultural Auschwitz.

What are the most interesting and promising trends of Belarusian independent culture? What is lacking? What could bring positive changes?

Only "shos" (*a phrase that usually refers to a Belarusian leader that can be loosely translated as 'Let him croak!' – translator's note*) can change the situation for the better, by which I mean the recurrent shift of the cultural paradigm similar to the one that was present in the early '90s. Those changes depended directly on the change of political rule. "Independent culture" is an oxymoron. Something that's "cultivated" is by definition dependent on something, while if it is not cultivated, it ends up in decline. The state does not support Belarusian artists "for free." It creates in Belarus the environment in which patronage (sponsorship) is impossible, let alone legal.

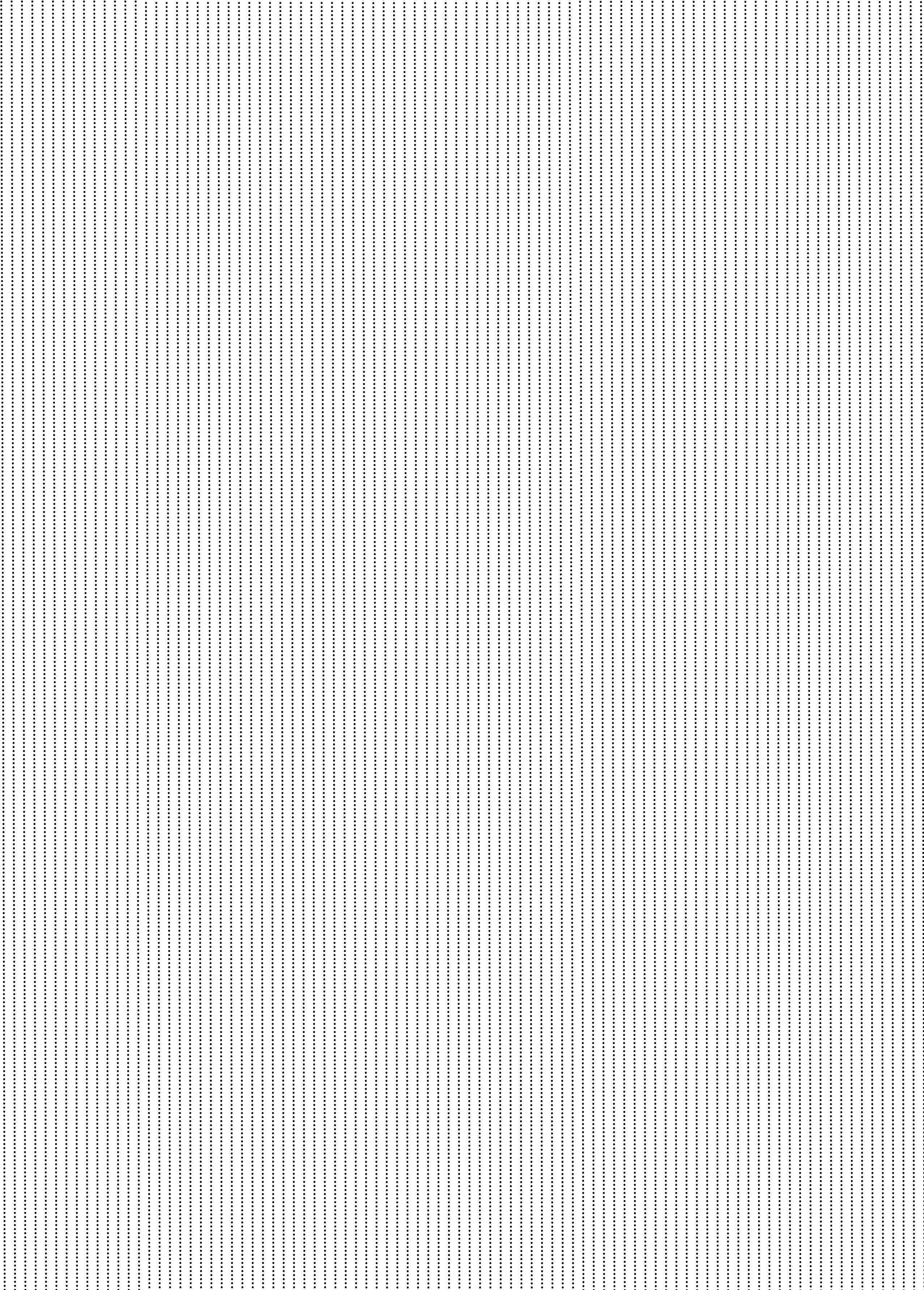
Another important thing is education. In the situation when schools cut the humanities curriculum, it would make sense to try to compensate children and teenagers for it using alternative ways in order to weather this problem out. While everything is more or less okay with art in Belarus,

the context in which this art is created is definitely not okay. Year after year, artists increasingly talk to emptiness.

HOW CAN YOU EVALUATE THE CHANGES IN THE INDEPENDENT CULTURE OF BELARUS OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS? WHAT EVENT, SITUATION OR PERSONALITY HAS IMPRESSED OR SURPRISED YOU THE MOST?

I think that the past twenty years have prepared the ground for the formation of the full-fledged Belarusian culture as part of European culture. This formation, however, has just begun. In my view, the most significant phenomena in the cultural life of Belarus are: Alternative Theater, *Narodny Albom*, *ARCHE* magazine, books by Valiantsin Akudovich and Ihar Babkou, Bum bam lit, Belarusian Collegium, *Nasha Niva* edited by Siarhei Dubavets, newspaper *Navinki*, European Humanities University, the "Y" Gallery (formely Padzemka), Graffiti Club (an alternative musical scene that differs from local pop music and Belarusian rock music format of Krama and Ulis bands). In poetry, the works by Ryazanov, Arlou, Khadanovich are the most significant. The revival of *tarashkevitsa* was another significant event. After 1991, borders opened up, and Belarusians had an incentive to learn foreign languages. The command of English and Polish among intellectuals has increased. A new school of translators from various languages has grown. One of the most important and interesting trends is the formation of Russian-language culture in Belarus. This applies to literature, theater, and music. Serebryanaya Svadba band is a representative example. Yet another trend is a clear division of art into "old" and "new." By saying "old," I don't mean the Soviet heritage. I think this is relevant for the segment of culture we call "pro-governmental" or "official." After the "old" epoch of the "national revival" in the '90s, which was based on "language," "nation," and "independence," a "new" time has come. The independent culture of Belarus in the '00s reflects the poignant process of the birth of civil society. Furthermore, I think the number one need of this new culture is to become part of the global (European) context, the "Western canon" as artists see it.

CULTURE ANALYSIS



Belarusian contemporary art is represented today by a community of *authors* who have not had any “art scene”. To survive in these “hostile” conditions, an *author* has to resort to “guerrilla” (“partisan”) strategies.



ARTUR KLINOV

BELARUSIAN ART “UNDERGROUND,” OR THE COUNTRY WITH NO GALLERIES

A full-grown art infrastructure – galleries, art centers, magazines, curatorship – is the key component of cultural space in the civilized world. Not only does it promote the formation of art market, but it also stimulates comprehensive artistic process. This infrastructure has never existed in Belarus, and it is not yet there today.

The non-availability of contemporary art institutions is observed in all spheres of Belarusian culture and art: cinema, literature, contemporary art, theater. Undoubtedly, on the one hand, this situation can be explained by the ideological model of the Belarusian state, which follows the Soviet pattern. On the other hand, this is also about the Belarusian society (by which I mean the masses of people), which has continued its gradual transformation from *rural* into *urban* population for several decades now. Correspondingly, the society’s view of culture begins to change; people feel the need for *another* art and start investing in this field, both morally and financially.

"OFFICIAL" CULTURE AND "GUERRILLA" STRATEGY

Belarusian art "underground," or the country with no galleries

Belarusian contemporary art is represented today by a community of *authors* who have not had any "art scene" or a full-fledged art infrastructure for already twenty years since the break-up of the Soviet Union. To survive on the territory where there is no need for an artist, an *author* has to resort to "guerrilla" strategies, that is, to survive by all possible means despite the "hostile" conditions. In other words, one has to be a DIY-gallery: an exhibition space, curator, manager, loader and seller at the same time.

On the one hand, the *country with no galleries* concept is beneficial for the state, since the stagnation of culture induces the stagnation of society. For years, the state has sponsored the Soviet model of culture, thus suppressing any attempted movement or initiative. Naturally, the absence of galleries resulted in the non-availability of all other elements of art infrastructure. We had no curators because they would have no place to work. There were no exhibitions, because there were no curators, and there were no critics, since they would have nothing to write about.

Just like in the Soviet period, culture in Belarus is divided into two categories: "official" and "unofficial." On the one part, the Belarusian state declares support to "arts in all forms." On the other, those dealing with culture in practice are faced with "double standards." With no clear definition of what the state apparatus means by "art in all forms," the government officials in command of culture interpret this term from the standpoint of their own preferences and tastes in line with the *approved* ideological course. ("The country pursues the continuous course aimed at forming the ideology of Belarusian state and crystallizing the Belarusian national idea. The national idea is most capaciously and laconically expressed by the slogan of the President of the Republic of Belarus: 'For a strong and prosperous Belarus!'" – a quote from the official Internet website of the President of the Republic of Belarus.)

But, unlike the "official" culture in the times of the Soviet Union, the ideologically correct Belarusian art plays no significant role for the nation. Under the Soviet rule, the system needed cultural figures to create decoration for the play about "the society of universal happiness and justice." Apartments, bonuses, spa resorts packages were granted to artists for their loyal service. In the '90s, when the new system was no longer in need of those authors, the "official" culture, just like the independent culture, became unattended.

The only difference is that the "official" culture traditionally continues receiving subsidies from the state which funds exhibitions, plain-airs, programs for young talents, and gives out stipends that are hardly sufficient to buy canvas and paints.

Despite these "hostile" conditions, Belarusian contemporary art survives and keeps developing due to the enthusiasm of artists and some private initiatives. However, just like in the Soviet period, this process takes place in Belarus' art "underground."

It was owing to such initiatives in the '90s that small, private art centers and galleries (The Sixth Line in Minsk, Salt Warehouses in Vitebsk) emerged. Big art festivals and exhibitions of Belarusian "underground" artists were organized. For instance, in 1994 Nikolai Prusakov and Vasili Vasiliev joined by a group of artists initiated an independent exhibition project called In-formation. Unfortunately, due to mainly financial constraints, such "initiatives" were short-lived. In many countries, the state is the key sponsor of culture. It supports private initiatives by, for example, offering exhibition spaces at discount prices or even free of charge. In Belarus, the government continues to treat private art centers as commercial entities. It is no wonder that such "initiatives" die out after two or three years because of economic difficulties.

Some art platforms, though rather exceptionally, would be given certain preferences. For instance, The Sixth Line received a helping hand from the director of one state-run agency, who accommodated the exhibition on the premises of the enterprise he was heading. When a new director took over, he did not need a gallery, so it disappeared. In other words, support to such initiatives was a matter of chance and personal taste of some state official rather than the official policy of the state.

As I mentioned in the beginning, besides the specific cultural policy of the state (or rather the lack of a clear policy on culture), the keystone for the *country with no galleries* should be sought in the mentality of Belarusians who, due to historical conditions, remained a rural nation for a long period of time. In the '90s, the nation began its transformation from agrarian to urban life. However, without the support from the state, this transformation comes about slowly. Instead of promoting liberal education in Belarus, the state, conversely, cuts liberal arts curricula at schools and universities. For instance, in the place of the World Art Culture course in secondary schools,





Belarusian art “underground,” or the country with no galleries

the government has introduced just one elective class per week on the same subject.

However, there is definitely a hope for a breakthrough in Belarus' cultural policy. The change of generations in the state apparatus is actively taking place, as new people with progressive views on art and with understanding of the role of culture in the state policy take over from Soviet-style officials. Authorities start thinking about national self-identification, and as a consequence, understand that the national project is not going to be a success without investments in culture. Culture itself begins to change as well.

Belarus' participation in the Venice Bienalle 2011 with the curator Mikhail Borozna's project "Kodex" was an indication of some "shift" in cultural policy of the state. The Belarusian state thus recognized contemporary art as well as the need to support and develop it. Unfortunately, most often such "recognition" remains just a formal declaration. Even at the Venice Bienalle, Belarus' national pavilion was supervised by ideology officials. As a result, the Belarusian project could not fully develop and, consequently, did not make a statement, despite its potential and some progressive trends in the art environment in Belarus.

BELARUSIAN “GUERRILLAS” ABROAD

The *country with no galleries* situation was one of the reasons for a huge migration wave among those Belarusian artists who had to move and implement their projects abroad: in Poland, Germany, Russia, or Sweden (e.g. "Contemporary Artists of Belarus" at Theater Gallery in Darmstadt, Germany, 1990; "Belarusian Avantgard" at Norblin Gallery and "This Is Us" at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Poland, 1991).

Some authors left for good and built outposts of Belarusian artists abroad. For instance, Ales Rodin settled in Berlin in the '00s. His workshop in Tacheles, which is a free Art House in the city center, became one of Belarusian "guerrilla" art centers. Andrei Dereiko, Zhanna Grak work in Dusseldorf; Igor Tishin, Natalia Zaloznaya, Maksim Tyminko – in Amsterdam; Elena Davidovich, Igor Kashkurevich, Anna Shkolnikova, Marina Naprushkina and others – in Berlin.

Nowadays the migration of Belarusian artists has stopped, while a new generation of "guerrillas" is entering the Belarusian art. Those "guerrillas" stay in Belarus and travel to Europe to participate in occasional projects.

"Opening the Door? Belarusian Art Today" by the Lithuanian curator Kestutis Kuizinas was one of the most significant projects for Belarusian contemporary art in 2010. It is still widely discussed in the Belarusian artistic environment. The exhibition was special because for the first time over a long period it gathered in the same gallery space the works by Belarusian artists who lived both in Belarus (Ruslan Vashkevich, Aleksei Lunev, Artur Klinov, Igor Peshekhonov, the art group Positive Actions, Igor Savchenko, Sergei Shabokhin, Alexei Shinkarenko, Filip Chmyr and the Belarusian Climate art group, Vladimir Tsesler, and Sergei Voichenko) and abroad (Marina Naprushkina, Elena Davidovich, Alexander Komarov, Maksim Tyminko, Anna Shkolnikova, Oksana Gurinovich, Alexander Korablev, Oleg Yushko). It is important that in the process of planning, the curator staked primarily on the works that were topical in the context of the political situation in Belarus. As a result, many artists, especially those living in Belarus, got an opportunity to express themselves freely on the topics of Belarusian reality. It is obviously not yet possible to implement such a project on the territory of Belarus.

"OFFICIAL" ART INFRASTRUCTURE THAT IS *NON*-EXISTENT

As of today, there are several museums and small galleries in Belarus; the *Mastactva/Art* magazine is published. Nevertheless, all these "institutions" have nothing in common with art infrastructure the way it is understood in the civilized world.

Belarusian art "underground," or the country with no galleries

Museums as a rule fulfill their original purpose to maintain and replenish their collections in order to put together exhibitions (like the National Arts Museum). Alternatively, they can operate as exhibition halls or "hangars," which artists, if they have funds, can rent to showcase their projects. If there is no funding, an artist can by chance become part of some collective project dedicated to a solemn date, or get a possibility of running a personal exhibition dedicated to his or her jubilee.

Besides art projects, these sites very often host events that have nothing to do with art. Yesterday it could be the venue of the biennale of Belarusian contemporary art, while today it hosts a honey fair and tomorrow animal fans will get together to exhibit their pets. That is exactly how the Palace of Art operates. The reason is clear: the platform, run by the official Union of Artists of Belarus, has to survive in the current conditions.

There is the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belarus as well, but contemporary art can be found there only on a title plate. Small private galleries operate mainly as painting salons, which serve the interests of "photographic," "beautiful," or realistic art. They do it for really meager money, because nobody will pay much.

The role of a curator in a proper meaning of the word is also non-existent, especially with regard to state-owned entities. The term "curator" quickly entered the vocabulary of Belarusian museum specialists. All showcased exhibitions are signed by curators besides the names of authors. However, in most cases, the role of a curator is limited to writing the introduction to an exhibition. There are exceptions, of course, and they are mostly about the "Y" Contemporary Art Gallery, the phenomenon which will be explored below.

The *Mastactva/Art* magazine mentioned above is nowadays the only official publication in Belarus which tries to analyze and archive events of Belarusian culture and art. However, it is obvious that just one magazine cannot cover in the same manner all segments of art: cinema, theater, art, and music. Therefore, on the one hand, it has too little space for comprehensive criticism. On the other hand, this way or another, the magazine continues to exist in the "post-Soviet" tradition, supporting "friendly" artists and ignoring "foes."

BELARUSIAN ART "UNDERGROUND" TODAY

In 2002, the artist Artur Klinov started to publish *pARTisan*, an almanac of Belarusian contemporary art, which for many years remained the only platform to represent the interests of "partisan" or "guerrilla" Belarusian art in the first place. In the first issue, Klinov published the "Partisan and anti-partisan" manifesto where he formulated the main concept of a "partisan": "The concept of a partisan is a concept of struggle, of a fight of a human for the right to personal cultural autonomy, but only if this right is recognized by another human being." Due to the *pARTisan* magazine, many significant events in Belarusian art "underground" were archived, such as The Sixth Line, In-formation projects in Vitebsk, the works of Igor Tishin, Valdimir Lappo and others.

Clearly, with the development of the Internet in Belarus, many websites and portals like another.by, mart.by, kyky.org, urban.by, 34mag.net and others emerged, offering more diversified critical articles, reviews and interviews with artists, and targeting a larger audience. These initiatives are usually sporadic; their authors, in most cases, have no professional background in the field of art and stake on the entertaining side of culture rather than on a professional analysis of Belarusian art process. Nevertheless, these initiatives serve as the only independent institution of art criticism in Belarus.

The recently launched portal Art Aktivist deserves a special mention. Many put certain hopes on this website in the formation of professional art critical space in Belarus. Created by a young artist Sergei Shabokhin, the web platform plans not only to become an informational resource in the field of Belarusian contemporary art, but also to begin archiving the events and authors of the '90s-'10s, to make up a list of museums and galleries, and to set up a video archive of exhibitions and interviews. That is, to do what the Contemporary Art Museum, for instance, should do, if its administration would not be so sluggish and would adequately understand of the Museum's mission.

The emergence of the "Y" Contemporary Art Gallery in Minsk was significant for the national cultural "field." Today, this gallery is virtually the only platform that takes the role of the center of Belarusian contemporary art. This is a totally private initiative which exists mainly on funding from donors. It cropped up as a fruit of the emerging readiness of the middle class to support modern art in Belarus.

Together with that platform, new interesting professional curatorial projects eventually came about. They are, for instance: "Philosophy of Masses. Belarusian neo-pop-art" (curator Sergei Shabokhin), Andrei Busel's project "Aetemus et momentum" (curator Oksana Zhgirovskaya), joint Belarusian-Swedish project Visual Arts: New Practices (curators Martin Schibli and Anna Chistoserdova). Besides, "Y" is the initiator of special projects, which aim to give young artists the opportunity of fulfilling themselves (Oil Painting projects, Smart Art contest for young artists). The gallery is a partner of such "initiatives" as the contest of art critics. Towards a Modern Museum (leader Alla Weissband), the Radius of the Zero: Anthology of the '00s research project (organizers Oksana Zhgirovskaya, Olga Shparaga, Ruslan Vashkevich). The "Y" gallery also hosts roundtable meetings, public debates, and discussions about events and exhibitions.

The practice of "open" discussions of projects and meetings with artists undoubtedly has a positive impact on the processes unfolding in Belarusian art environment. It is of no lesser importance that the philosophers and sociologists from the European Humanities University and the Minsk-based Center for European Studies have started to contribute to the artistic community. Thus, this community becomes increasingly open and begins to treat criticism not only as "destructive," but also as one of the "stimulators" of the creative process.

Besides "Y," the Nova gallery of visual art has recently reopened. Using the premises of the Minsk-based Center of Photography, "Nova" presents photo projects, organizes meetings with photographers, and screens films on photography. Vladimir Parfenok, photographer, curator and the director of "Nova," is also the editor of Photoscope, one of Belarus' biggest Internet portals devoted to photography.

Despite the domination of the "absence" phenomenon in all elements of national art infrastructure, along with all the afore-mentioned problems, one may say that the "guerrilla" ("partisan") strategy for artists is justified. Belarusian authors have survived and, most importantly, have started to take part, although still "under the table," in the artistic process inside Belarus.

ARTUR KLINOV

Meeting at round tables, Belarusian critics as well as theater and stage directors like to discuss "modern trends," "contemporary heroes" and "contemporary topics." Yet in practice, Belarusian state theater prefers to "comfortably" close its eyes to contemporary Belarusian life.



TATYANA ARTIMOVICH

CONTEMPORARY BELARUSIAN THEATER'S STRUGGLE FOR DIVERSITY

"Belarusian theater" does not exist in the modern worldwide context. Some Belarusian plays attract interest at international festivals: for instance, the building theatre of Aleksey Lelyavski, plastique theater of Slava Inozemcev, Russian-Belarusian project The Wedding by Anton Chekhov's by the National Academic Yanka Kupala Theatre. However, these are rather exceptions that underline the absence of the phenomenon of Belarusian theater as such (unlike the phenomena of Lithuanian or Polish theaters).

There are around 30 theater spaces in Belarus; each has its own repertoire policy. Despite that, Belarusian theater is a rather *homogenous* phenomenon, characterized mainly by "traditionalism" or "academicism." This homogeneity is more than just a topic for discussion; it is a real problem. This problem is not so much related to the |"lack of individualities," about which Belarusian theater critics like to write.

The reason for the Belarusian theater's *sudden* return to the aesthetics of the official Soviet art of the 70s that has been taking place since the mid-90s, is obvious. The state is not interested in alternative, non-traditional forms of theater, preferring to lead a specific cultural policy with a clear ideological set of rules.

BELARUSIAN THEATER: A SELF-IDENTIFICATION ATTEMPT OF THE LATE 80S – EARLY 90S

Contemporary Belarusian theater's struggle for diversity

The break-up of the Soviet Union triggered the active process of liberation from the aesthetics of the Soviet art both in Belarusian theater and in other spheres of culture. Plays of previously banned authors like, for instance, Frantsishak Alyakhnovich (repressed in the 1930s) got on stage. New performances were born that provoked interest both in Belarus and abroad. The previously banned play *The Locals* by Yanka Kupala, staged by Nikolai Pinigin, was a significant event in the life of Belarusian theater.

In the 80s-90s, several projects in experimental studio theaters, totally different by form and content, saw the light. The Slava Inozemcev's InZhest Theatre emerged along with Rid Talipov's intellectual theater and Vitaly Barkovsky's postmodernist project.

In the 90s, the Western European intellectual drama became popular in Belarus. For instance, the director of just emerged Belarusian state youth theater Vitali Kotovitsky staked on the literature of that kind. His theater's repertoire included plays by Jean-Paul Sartre, Sławomir Mrożek, Eugène Ionesco and others. At the same time, other theaters were searching for the best project of the national theater that would "arouse the nation." Performances by Nikolai Pinigin and Nikolai Trukhan that brought light on the issues of national self-identification were very popular.

Thus, at the end of the last millennium, Belarusian theater had some potential and was a multi-level phenomenon for a diverse target audience. It combined staginess and entertainment with intellectuality and experiments.

Since the middle of the 90s, the experimental theater movement has been in decline. Since the 00s, as many experts admit, Belarusian theater has started to return to the "proven" aesthetics of the Soviet theater of the 70s. Intellectual drama disappears from playbills, while the stake is on light genres: comedy, melodrama, vaudeville. This is caused, first of all, by the ideological course of the state, which finds this form *comfortable* and easy to understand.

On the other hand, the state doesn't make it easy for theaters to survive: all of them, regardless of the status – academic or national, have to fulfill their financial obligations to the government. Therefore, their management chooses *light*, ideologically *safe* and commercially successful theater shows.

THE OOS: THE ATTACK OF YOUNGSTERS

The *new Belarusian drama* has emerged since the beginning of the new millennium. Young authors use this new form to re-define the borders of truth and theatricality. The first texts by Pavel Prazhko, Nikolai Rudkovski, Pavel Rassolko and Konstantin Steshik gave a dare to the "comfortable" Belarusian theater, which unlike Russian theaters tried to be deaf to young voices. Since Russian and Western theater experts approve the works of our authors, they become braver. They continue to write, their plays are published in foreign collections of plays and are staged in foreign theaters.

For instance, big-league Russian theaters widely acclaim the plays by Belarusian playwright Pavel Prazhko. His works are studied by Russian critics and literary experts who have already discovered the Prazhko theater phenomenon. None of the *much-talked-of* texts by Pavel got staged in Belarus.

The same is happening to other Belarusian authors who are recognized in the world. The theater "ignores" the works by Nikolai Khalezin, whose play *I have come* received a special prize of the Russian "Eurasia" award as well as the All-Russian Contest for Playwrights Protagonist's diploma and a special prize of Culture TV channel. It ignores as well the works by Konstantin Steshik, whose *A Man. A Woman. A Gun* took the second place in the nomination "free composition play" at Eurasia competition. Some plays by Nikolai Rudkovski "cannot" find stage, either. His *Invasion*, at the same time, got the special prize awarded by *Novaya Gazeta* journalists at the First international drama festival "Free Theater," while his *God of Tickling* was short-listed in the "Premiere.txt" contest of "Eurasia" competition.

Such a lack of attention to Belarusian young talents is surprising. Meeting at round tables, Belarusian critics, theater and stage directors like to discuss "modern trends," "contemporary heroes" and "contemporary topics." Yet in practice, state Belarusian theaters prefer to "comfortably" close its eyes to contemporary Belarusian life.

The problem of theater's *diversity* is a frequent topic of public discussions. Expert note that together with academic theaters Belarus should have separate platforms for *provocative* texts and experimental practices that will have their own audience. Unfortunately, even Minsk Youth theater is not working with the young audience. On the contrary, it stages plays that are not relevant to its target audience, or, as one of the theater's actor joked, "for 50+."

The Republican Theatre of Belarusian Drama (Minsk), which claims that it is searching for experiments and new playwrights, very *carefully* selects authors and texts. Even an *apolitical* new play seems to be too provocative for the theater. As its young director Nikita Volod'ko says, "they ban not only those who talk about politics, but anyone who touches upon the topics that are tabooed by the state ideology." There is an unspoken division of playwrights to "allowed" and "non-allowed" ones, which is caused among other factors by the "self"-censorship. Therefore, the theater's repertoire includes mostly the plays by *proven* young authors.

The "deficit" of the relevant topic on Belarusian stage brought an expected consequence: young viewers do not treat theater as a place where some relevant topics or problems can be raised. For youngsters, theater is like an "offline" history textbook on world culture, or a museum, where the "magic lamp" and actors speak some *unusual* language. The visit to the theater is a funny way to spend time or is forced by the educational system, since the "cultural visits" of school students and soldiers to theaters are widely spread.

Currently, onstage readings, which sometimes are included in the programs of official theatre festivals or in one-off laboratories organized by independent groups have become the only "bridge" between new plays and viewers. Although viewers show obvious interest to such events and actively discuss the content of those plays, none of the plays, presented to the public, got staged. No one researches the new Belarusian drama; new books are not published. The recent "Contemporary Belarusian drama" collection includes texts written in the 80s-90s.

The only exception here is the project of a young director Ekaterina Averkova who has recently become the director of Mahiliou Drama Theater. Despite the lack of understanding and support from her bosses and colleagues, she started a one-year project "Stage readings" on the small stage of the theater. Once a month, the reading of a play of some young Belarusian author is organized, which is followed by an open discussion. The project should results in two full-fledged performances that will be based on two presented plays. The reading of *The God of Tickling* by Nikolai Rudkovski and *The Closed Door* by Pavel Prazhko was regarded as a significant event in the non-formal theater life of Belarus.

The German-Belarusian Drama Laboratory "MitOst" that took place in Minsk this February became a unique experience for Belarusian theater

community. During four days, six young playwrights created new texts under the guidance of German director Lars Vogel. The main requirement for them was "relevance." The readings organized at the final stage of the Laboratory's work, showed that Belarusian authors were ready to bravely face the contemporary situation. Their texts featured the recent Japanese tragedy and recent presidential elections in Belarus. Despite everyone's enthusiasm, it was obvious that the Laboratory would not be able to continue its work.

The primary reason for such a bad prospect is that there is no independent theater center or laboratory in Belarus, which would research and permanently practice new theatrical forms. The free experimental theater platform is absent as such.

Independent initiatives are forced to rent municipal stages for the realization and presentation of their project. This is doable for the commercial theater products (theatrical enterprises); however, alternative and experimental theaters have to survive, balancing between commercial and non-commercial art.

A bright example is theater Company under the guidance of director Andrei Savchenko who has voluntarily created and staged plays on rented municipal stages for many years with no external support.

"HERE AND NOW" OF BELARUSIAN THEATER

The new theatrical generation doesn't want to tolerate the *homogenous* directions that they get from the officials despite the general *monotonous* situation in Belarusian theaters and the lack of interest to young specialists (the case of Ekaterina Averkova is rather an exception). Due to the availability of information and freedom of movement, the new generation of playwrights, directors and actors not only talk about the necessity to upgrade Belarusian theater, but make some concrete steps.

One of the most impressive recent independent theater projects is Eugene Korniag's project KorniagTHEATRE, which, based on the suggested by German choreographer Pina Bausch form, suggests its own unique vision of plastique and drama theater. The high ticket prices (which are caused, first of all, by the high cost of the premises rent) do not scare away *Café 'Pogloshcheniye'* and *Non-Dances* gather crowds. Volha Skvartsova and Dzmitry Zaleski's Independent D.O.Z.SK.I. Theater of Contemporary Choreography is popular, too.





Contemporary Belarusian theater's struggle for diversity

The staging of the plays by scandalous yet widely recognized Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's was a kind of breakthrough for the Belarusian theater. They were staged in the New Theater first and then on the small stage of National Academic Yanka Kupala Theater. Unfortunately, these experiments did not get any support from Belarusian critics; on the contrary, journalists of some state publication accused directors and managers of theaters in the lack of understanding of "what they want to say," while the playwright was labeled as "pale." After such reviews, the appearance of modern plays in repertoires is highly questionable.

The Belarusian State Puppet Theater's director Aleksey Leliavski stands out in this environment. Besides his planned shows for children, Aleksey Leliavski develops the experimental genre of building theatre that fuses the forms of drama, puppet and plastique theaters. His unconventional interpretation of Chekhov's *The Seagull, The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters* uses the latest achievements of contemporary European theater.

The Slava Inozemcev's InZhest Theater that emerged as a result of studio experiments in the 80s continues its successful and aesthetically complete work. Although the theater does not have its own stage and is in constant financial troubles, it continues to stage plays and experiments with different forms (plastique, Butoh dance, theater games, and video). It also has its own studio that supplies new actors to the theater.

The Free Theater is a unique project in Belarusian theater environment. Although some call it a political speculation, this is the only permanent theater project in Belarus that tries to be as truthful as possible in reflecting the current Belarusian political and social "here and now."

The Free Theater went beyond just allowing themselves to talk on any topic of their concern. It applies this rule as a main principle of its activities. The topics that are officially tabooed are openly and ruthlessly presented

in the plays of the Free Theater. Unfortunately, after the latest presidential elections the troupe was included into the "ban list" and cannot perform in Belarus, so they have to live abroad.

The successors of the Free Theater are students of Fortinbrass studio that was created by the theater several years ago. Having no formal theatrical education, they write plays in the underground, publicly read them and make their directorial debuts. The Rima Ushkevich's play *Flawless* (Bezuprechnyi) made it to the short-list of modern drama HotInk in New York.

The First Independent International Festival of Experimental Theaters – That Very Festival became a significant event for Belarusian theater environment. It was organized by a group of enthusiasts from theater "ROND" with the help of Bonn Municipal Cultural Institution (Germany). The basis for the six-day program was formed by street and plastique plays of experimental groups from Czech Republic, USA, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Russia and Belarus. The huge interest to the festival has proved again that there is a "deficit" of alternative theaters in Belarus, since their development and promotion is not in any way supported by state programs.

Naturally, the form of *Non-Dances* by Eugen Korniag, *Being Harold Pinter* by Vladimir Scherban' or *Access to Body* by Viacheslav Inozemtsev are not an innovation for the European theatrical context. However, each of those projects is a "small victory" in Belarus, since they make an important step towards the theatrical *diversity*. In conditions of *monotony* the most important thing is not how something is done, but the very fact of using alternative forms to present alternative materials.

Unfortunately, many of those projects are not featured in the media, have to survive in semi-underground conditions or are shown only once during stage reading. Such "elitist" nature of independent project negatively impacts the formation of the diverse theatrical environment and contributes to the myth about Belarusian theatrical helplessness.

One should remember that the authors of those projects have to "invent" new forms for Belarusian theater. There is no theatrical education in Belarus that would be alternative to academic education. Belarusian Academy of Arts educates future traditional theater workers. Its curriculum has not



courses on contemporary trends and practices. Students have to learn *another* theater on their own: through books, some theater shows or from the experience of foreign specialists presented during master classes.

Monotonous and outdated curricula alongside with the lack of highly qualified professor force young people to study abroad. After the end of their studies, they do not return to Belarus, since the experience shows that they are not in demand there.

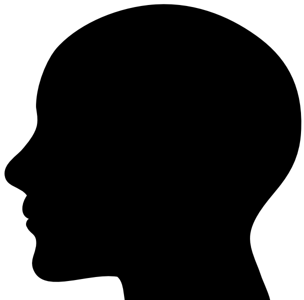
Young director Olga Sorotokina stayed in Moscow. Her degree performance *Capital Around* based on young Belarusian author Sergey Girgel's play attracted attention not only in Belarus. Her show represented Belarus at the oldest European festival – New Plays from Europe Theatre Festival in Wiesbaden. After that Olga got invited to the Republican Theatre of Belarusian Drama and was not allowed to make any performance for a year. So, she got into Meyerhold Center's Magistracy in Moscow. After graduation she stayed in Russia, realizing that she would have to deal with "lumps" in Belarus while trying to defend her creative ideas.

The audience is the first victim of existing theatrical monotony. It has to select between entertaining and "Belarusian" theaters. This is a vivid example of how Belarusian ideology works: intellectual, reasonable and provocative theater has no place here.

On one hand, of course, current circumstances hinder the development of Belarusian theater. On the other, they inspire the new generation of theater workers, who have no hopes for state support and try to work autonomously. This allows to hope that soon Belarusian theater will get to the next stage of its development.

TATYANA ARTIMOVICH

Independent theater in contemporary Belarus exists in the form of scattered, chaotic projects, irregular festivals, or one-off plays.



K.S.

INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN THEATER: MYTH OR REALITY?

The question "Is there an independent theater in Belarus?" is rather rhetorical for the nation where everything is state-owned. There are twenty seven state-funded drama theaters obliged to accomplish their repertory plans as approved by the Ministry of Culture, i.e. to return the money invested by the state. Permission from the Ministry of Culture to stage a play is compulsory, as are both the permission and money from the same ministry if a theater wishes to participate in international festivals.

DULL REALITY

The Belarusian state treats artistic space as an appendage which unfortunately requires budgetary spending. At the same time, the state is surprised that cultural institutions are not profitable enough, are not bringing a stable and big income.

There are no endowments in Belarus to support cultural projects. There are no philanthropists, because businessmen do not understand the necessity to subsidize culture. Besides, instead of lowering taxes (like, for instance,

in the United States), the state will immediately ask them: "What is the source of your income that allows you to hand out cash so freely?"

Does Belarus need independent theater? Does it exist at all? The conservatism and the "closed" nature of Belarusian culture, as well the frustration of the society with the country' complex political situation, do not contribute to the emergence of new theater projects. The existing ones do so against the odds. The most famous is The Free Theater run by Mikalai Khalezin, who is very outspoken in his works about the political situation in Belarus. Independent theater in contemporary Belarus exists in the form of scattered, chaotic projects, irregular festivals or one-off plays.

Creative labs, brought at times from abroad, are just "one-off injections." Of course, ideas, plans, and projects do emerge from those workshops, or even materialize into plays. But, when foreign guests leave, Belarusian artists do not know what to do next: where to perform their plays and how to implement new ideas.

Moreover, as a consequence, artists do not get motivated enough to create projects that have a good chance to die in red-tape or not to pay off because of the local tradition to regard theater as something pathetically serious requiring an evening-dress code. Since state educational institutions obviously do not teach cultural arts managers how to set up an independent theater, or to implement a project with the support from international cultural foundations, there are no professional managers.

The prevailing social frustration is not conducive for any creative undertakings. Young artists who start achieving success in self-realization quickly come to understand that here in Belarus "the kingdom is too small, no room to turn around" and "the rules of the game are set clearly." For that reason, many choose to leave the country. Those staying behind to fight this dull reality quickly see their enthusiasm exhausted. Personal qualities like individuality, leadership, and dissimilarity are regarded as socially dangerous, and therefore repressed. Many interesting ideas, projects, and plans remain unfulfilled and unaccomplished.

Independent Belarusian theater may be a small island in the national cultural space, yet it prevents this space from becoming a "stagnant river." Slava Inozemcev's InZhest theater, Volha Skvartsova and Dzmitry Zaleski's D.O.Z.SK.I., Eugene Korniag's project KorniagTHEATRE work in this direction, promoting artistic ideas.

INDEPENDENCE ISLAND

Director Eugene Korniag started his career in Minsk. He graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Arts as a puppet theater actor. Upon implementing several successful projects, he enrolled into a direction program at the Meyerhold Center's Magistracy in Moscow. Korniag continues staging plays in Belarus as well. At the same time, his KorniagTHEATRE does not have a permanent stage or troupe. Young artists from diverse state-run theaters unite to implement projects and productions.

The *Café 'Pogloshcheniye'* show became a youth manifesto in experimental theater a couple of years ago. Using the "Done with the Theater" motto, producers replaced a traditional stage with a night club and turned spectators into performance participants. The action was fragmentary: dance numbers were mixed with the monologues of characters and plastique. Eugene Korniag blends diverse social layers, wisecracks, and throws the unpleasant truth into the face of the public. He turns everything that is so scrupulously covered up inside out, touching upon abortion, drugs, and the "narrowness" of the provincial state – the taboos of Belarusian theaters.

Characters in *Café 'Pogloshcheniye'* are clubbing girls taken by their emotional experiences, phobias, and complexes. Katsiaryna Averkava's character is an anorexic model, who changes dresses and poses for cameras, is allegedly overweight and, eventually, unable to take any food. Yulia Mikhnevich's pregnant character attempts dancing in a club even with her obviously hindering huge belly. At one point, she starts hitting her belly with fists, shouting aggressively that she is sick and tired of this kid. Korniag uses purely metaphorical means to display the abortion scene: in the middle of the hall, Valiantsina Hartsuyeva's character is placed in a huge plastic sack that gradually gets filled with smoke. She tries to get out, fights suffocation, gives a cry after the last breath, and falls. Then, she is dragged on the floor as an unnecessary decoration until her body gets out of sight. The show must go on. Mikhnevich's heroine jumps onto the stage without her huge belly. Very lively and satisfied, she starts dancing again. This time, nothing prevents her from enjoying life.

Korniag easily blends tragedy and irony, the past and the present. The next scene is a culmination of irony with regard to the absurd reality, where the Soviet past and European presence co-exist. An obscure heroine in

traditional ethnic dress appears among club regulars – the girls with heavy make-up. She tries to say something pathetically patriotic, start a song, or dance *liavonikha* (a Belarusian folk dance). She looks clumsy and very comical. Meanwhile, a small black-and-white TV set to the right of the heroine is showing harvester drivers. A news presenter talks about good yields. The girls in shining trendy dresses laugh at her. As if having realized all the craziness and nonsense of her presence, she disappears from the stage. Korniag's irony is grotesque, precise, and down to the point, disclosing the reality so easily. Producers display precisely the suffocating atmosphere and swampy landscape where time seems to stand still. That's why Volha Skvartsova's heroine climbs on a huge loud-speaker after an expressive dance and shouts hysterically: "I can't hear the music! Turn the volume up!" Yet the speakers are almost bursting. "I have already seen everything in this country. Get me to a new club in New York," she laments.

This show, just like many others (*Non-Dances, Endless, Birthday Party, C'est la vie. Exercices pres du baton*), was not based on some existing script. Korniag constructs his plays by himself, giving priority to actor plasticity. In *Café 'Pogloshcheniye',* the slogan is "Done with the Theater." Another play, exposing abuse, is titled *Non-Dances*.

Korniag raises topics that are usually hushed up. In order to wake up the audience from lethargic sleep and inspire them to reflect and analyze, he exposes the pain of human existence and doesn't spare anyone's feelings.

The InZhest theatre initiated a professional experimental theater of plasticity in Belarus. Presently, InZhest is a renowned brand, in existence since 1980, representing a wide range of artistic verbal search: clownery, street happenings, Butoh dance. Its tour geography is vast: Russia, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, the Netherlands, Sweden, etc. The troupe implements projects in collaboration with the Polish Teatr Formy of Józef Markocki and Japanese Ten Pen Chii.

Viacheslav Inozemcev is interested in human existence and sufferings related to it. He plays with meanings and ambiguous associations. His famous *DKDance* displays a human being "without skin," exposing the human existence in its pure essence, without form. A nude human body symbolizes the return to the roots and natural organics, bringing catharsis and regeneration. Physicality is actors' manifestation where they get rid of personality, psychics, and gender. InZhest was among the first to introduce

physicality; that sphere had been almost a blank page for Belarusian theatre. "I find it hard to place the world into frames," says Inozemcev. Therefore, he creates an associative space, open for perception. InZhest utilizes the elements of street theatre on stage as well. In *DKDance*, appearing on tall stilts, the actor gradually gets rid of them: a loud chainsaw in the hands of another character does its job, making incisions until the main character falls on the edge of the stage. However, he eventually stands up. The final scene, where Inozemcev tries to stand up and learns walking again, is a praise of the strength of human spirit.

The D.O.Z.SK.I. theater was founded by Volha Skvartsova and Dzmitry Zaleski in 2005. Its genre, based on the synthesis of choreographic and dramatic thinking, is defined by the founders as "contemporary dance." The public enthusiastically received *The Roof*, a play staged by the theater a few years ago. It was virtually impossible to buy tickets. The expressivity of actors, the dynamic structure of the space, music, and light that were acting as equal participants of the play created a truly energetic live action. *The Roof* tells us a story about human soul and mind that went out of control. The actors dance through the relations of the main characters who got lost in feelings and actions and are drowning in chaos. In a hot, fiery, and tightened air, abrupt words of the actress ("I don't understand anything anymore!") are followed by silence and the absence of motion: the actors are looking in the eye of their audience. Unlike Jan Fabre's plays that include 10- to 30-minute long breaks, during which actors smoke and observe the public, D.O.Z.SK.I.'s play gives the spectator only a minute long break, giving the action a new twist until everyone in the play gets to the roof. The actors are standing on the roof, looking down. Pause. Sarah Kane's heroine would already have overdosed out of despair, but *The Roof's* heroes are phasing into catharsis. The light is beaming from below, from the point all the actors look at, and they jump up, holding each other's hands, and transform the action into a joke.

In June 2009 D.O.Z.SK.I.'s *Flies on the Sun, or Insomnia*, was premiered in Warsaw. In October 2009, they brought to the Moscow festival "Etnika" another two productions, *Maturity* and *In the Valley of Destiny*. A month later, D.O.Z.SK.I. got the Grand Prix of the International Festival of Modern Choreography in Vitebsk for two one-act plays *Homo Sapiens* and *Rock--Paper-Scissors*.

The First Independent International Festival of Experimental Theaters – That Very Festival – took place in Minsk just recently, on April 21–26, 2011. The theater ROND and Evsitgney Mirovich's theatre-studio were the organizers of the festival. The list of co-organizers included, among others, the Belarusian State Academy of Arts, the Center of Belarusian Drama and Direction, the concert agency Bopromo and Bonn Municipal Cultural Institution (Germany). The goal of the festival was to create a platform for intercultural dialogues in the sphere of modern theater in Belarus. During six days eighteen theater groups and more than 280 participants and special guests contributed to a diverse festival program. The basis for the program was formed by street and plastique plays of experimental groups from Germany, USA, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Russia, and Belarus, as well as the works of youth theaters, including two charity shows: cartoons by the children's animation studio "We Are!" from children's oncology center in Baraulany and the performance by the "Pacific Ocean" puppet theater from an orphanage for disabled children. Free master classes were an important part of the festival. One of them was presented by Karel Vanek, a contact improvisation expert from Germany. Others were Butoh dance by Lily Emerson (USA), Street theater that included participation in flash mobs and was led by Kud Ljud from Slovenia. Tina Jucker from Germany presented a master class on the work with youth theaters, while Veronika Nasalskaya of Kazakhstan led a master class on drama of improvisation. The program was split into plastique and drama. The plastique part consisted of the plays by the theaters: InZhest, KorniagTHEATRE, D.O.Z.SK.I., EYE, the theater studio ROND, the plastic studio Barmaglot (Belarus), Karel Vanek Theater (Germany), Debris Company (Czech Republic), Lucid Street Theater (USA), Kud Ljud (Slovenia), while drama was represented by Studium Teatralne (Poland), Volokolaam Folk Theater (Russia), Marabu (Germany), D.E.M.I. (Russia).

ANGRY YOUNGSTERS

A new kind of Belarusian drama, which has developed since early 2000s and has no conducive environment in the current situation in the country, takes special place in Belarusian independent theater. "Angry" youngsters, following in the footsteps of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill from Great

Britain, Vasilliy Sigarev and Maksim Kurochkin from Russia, Michal Walczak and Marek Pruchniewski from Poland, create plays that depict a "here--and-now" person. The topics of those newest trends in drama are total communicational disconnection, alienation, remoteness of a person, instable emotions, depression, consumerism, family crises, abortions, abuse, and inability to self-identify.

Pavel Prazhko is one of the most notable representatives of alternative drama: he raises topics that are new to Belarus without a shadow of doubt. His plays are successfully staged abroad. For instance, *Life is Good* was staged in two well-known Moscow theaters at the same time: by Mikhail Ugorev in Teatr.doc (the play received the main Russian theater prize the Golden Mask in 2009) and by Eduard Bayakov in Praktika.

Life is Good's main characters are teenagers. This is a story of four young people: two brothers who work as physical training teachers and two schoolgirls. It is a glimpse into the life in which people do not have any thoughts or wishes. Their actions are driven by pure physical needs, which they are trying to satisfy, thinking that this will bring them happiness. They sincerely believe that their life is "good," but they are not happy. They are not in love, and physical pleasures cannot last long enough. The marriage of Aliaksei and Alena is an obvious tragic farce, in the spirit of TV reality shows: while the fiancé is deadly drunk and sleeping in the restroom, the bride decides that she loves his brother. Prazhko shows the life of unicellulates who possess neither own will nor critical thinking. Endless self-repeats and interruptions show the inability of main characters to express their feelings. They are neither killers nor criminals, rather just "plankton." The story of zombie-like plankton, reflected in the stage direction "don't think about anything," is continued in another Prazhko's play, *The Closed Doors*. By using this approach to his heroes repeatedly, Prazhko insists on their inability to think critically and to evaluate. His characters imitate life, unmotivated to live it to its fullest. Valera pretends to his parents that he has a girlfriend: a girl that he barely knows plays his sweetheart, while Valera, as the stage direction points out, "is not interested in anything." Insensitivity, indifference, inability to live life to its fullest, total fatigue, and the lack of interest in the outside world force the characters to imitate life rather than live it.

Mikalai Rudkouski is yet another Belarusian playwright known abroad. The author manages to deliver to viewers the feeling of the changed times

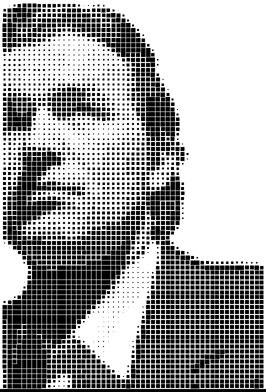
and makes a statement on contemporary problems. His comedy *Survive till the Premiere* is an ironic take on the modern Belarusian theaters' tradition to commemorate a wide variety of dates from World War II by staging histrionic dressed up plays. Actress Vera prepares herself for a "military" premiere in her theater and is longing for feeling and living through emotions and experiences of her character, a partisan. She trades two expensive suits of her husband, a businessman, for two hunks of bread from an old woman and serves this bread to her husband for dinner. She persuades her best friend to cut on spa sessions and solariums. At first, the friend refuses, but then she also gets inspired by "sacrificial ideas." The culmination of this curious situation is the moment when Vera, according to her own wishes, is raped in the presence of her husband, the latter collapsing unable to bear the scene. The situation, a paradox in itself, is brought to the extremity of absurdity. The fantastic irony with which the author treats the "zombie-identity" of the characters lightens the play, but does not conceal the seriousness of the problem.

There are no conditions in modern Belarus for this type of plays to be staged. Young directors who show interest in these works argue that they don't have space for their realization, while theater managers are unable to tackle the challenges presented by the current legal and financial environment and, therefore, cannot meet the needs of both artists and viewers. Art critics argue that the creative outcome of such plays will be a repeat and a faded copy of Russian or Polish plays. This way of thinking has a grain of truth: it is hardly practicable to form and freely develop a strong school of theater directors in "preserved" Belarusian conditions. One more question adds up to this vicious circle of impossibilities: is it achievable at all to develop a full-grown and innovative theater in the conditions of total instability? How can an artist think about highly spiritual things when the average salary in the country is $250, and the kilogram of buckwheat costs $4?

An independent theater, obviously, cannot be formed on its own or fall from the sky. Belarus needs a huge dose of foreign "injection" and assistance, ranging from laboratory work, mutual projects to basic master classes for stage directors and managers that would teach them project and festival management. Unfortunately, state institutions do not provide students with skills training for learning how to combine creativity with legal and managerial knowledge; they teach pure conservative theory.

K.S.

Belarus remains uncharted territory on the musical map of Europe. This "isolation," however, seems to be conducive to Belarusian underground music, which has developed its own specific, original style.



SERGEY PUKST

BELARUS: UNCHARTED TERRITORY ON THE MUSICAL MAP OF EUROPE

Why is Belarusian music *absent* in the world? Probably because, since the collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago, Belarusians have not developed a music market that would promote the music "product" both in the West and in the East.

Show business means competition. After the confrontation between artists gets to tabloids, the latter provoke scandals, thus maintaining the public's interest in them. In Belarus, this confrontation takes place "privately," since the majority of pop musicians work in quite closed environments, such as the Youth Variety Theater led by Vasily Rainchik or the Mikhail Finberg Orchestra, both state-owned. The artists may confront each other inside those institutions, but they will never air dirty linen in public.

Rock stars drink and argue in their own closed circle as well, trying to be friendly to pop competitors. Musically, however, they stay on their strictly parallel track. Neither pop stars nor rock stars are interested in a "showbiz"-style demonstration of their "personal drama." So, Belarusian show business comes to nothing more than a bunch of music videos that

serve the purpose of personal business cards for the potential corporate party customers.

As in Soviet times, Belarusian music clearly falls into two categories: "official" and "non-official." "Official" bands enjoy everything: payroll, concert halls, good equipment, guaranteed concert quotas and, as a consequence, some relative and statistical popularity. "Unofficial" bands do not get a penny. In fact, the state is not obliged to spend money on them. However, musicians exist in conditions where government controls all aspects of life. It means that if they are not part of some state-funded entity, musicians are left with no other potential source of income and have to survive on their own. The financial success of bands like Lyapis Trubetskoy, Serebryanaya Svad'ba, Troitsa, or N.R.M., is a strong proof that they are truly competitive and enjoy their fans' love. Still, even with a significant audience in Belarus, these bands have to earn mostly on trips abroad.

Thus, Belarus lacks a professional music community. Musicians exist as separate "islands," listening mostly to their inner selves. They do have some connections with colleagues, but their communication is not ruled by ugly showbiz-dominated patterns. Yet, ironically, this becomes their advantage, since their inner and outer (self)-isolation seems to be conducive to Belarusian underground music, which has developed its own specific, original style. Their relevance as musicians does not come as a result of some producer's effort; this is something intuitionally revealed by musicians themselves. It is not easy. However, this is a much more honest process than confinement the limitations of the mechanical repetition of just a few genre-specific accords that allow one to become a mannequin for teenage self-identification. *These were a few "advantages" of the current situation.*

Let's talk about "disadvantages" now. A concert "star" in the evening can be a metro passenger in the morning, taking a ride to her or his "mundane" job. The very few who earn a living from music can be split into two groups: "official" musicians who work in state-run music institutions and those playing in restaurants. Both are limited in their artistic growth.

Still, new bands and singers, which are capable of winning their audience at home and abroad, emerge even in such unfavorable conditions in Belarus. These musicians are usually part of the "non-official" music sector and exist "in defiance" of circumstances.

BANDS-WITH-CHARISMATIC-LEADERS

Bands-with-charismatic-leaders have existed in the post-Soviet societies for more than twenty years. In the late '80s, when the Soviet history stood at the crucial turning point, musicians-"tribunes" were in special demand. The Western music revolution of the '60s came to Belarus in the late '80s.

I have a personal aesthetic "trauma" related to those hopeful times, because, at the end of the day, they didn't bring a really new or interesting kind of music. Our problem was that, unlike in the West, where the sexual revolution and LSD created new music aesthetics, the Belarusian revolution took place mostly on a political level. As it later turned out, there were not so many new music ideas. Words became musicians' most important weapon.

The brightest examples of a new trend were Lyapis Trubetskoy and Mroya (which later became N.R.M.).

Lyapis Trubetskoy is obviously band No. 1 nowadays. It has to be admitted that in the late '80s the previously banned writers-absurdists such as Daniil Kharms or Alexander Vvedenskiy became very popular in the dissolving Soviet Union, setting unprecedented standards in self-irony. Lyapis Trubetskoy's front-man Sergei Mikhalok got that new trend perfectly. His clown-like verses covered some ambivalent truth always ready to be turned into a joke. Sergei in a masterly fashion presented the depths of a virgin rural mind that was wildly adjusting itself to the urban environment. He exploited various forms of that image until the beginning of the '00s.

The '00s brought the refreshing change of image. Sergei turned into a fit and brisk guy with tattoos and switched to the timelier, anti-globalist topics. Many did not believe him and thought it was a new kind of joke. The history of Lyapis Trubetskoy did not encourage the public to take Mikhalok's sincerity at its face value. So, at first the interest with the band grew, because the "joke" worked. Currently, however, the musicians sound more and more seriously. Mikhalok is able to voice his opinion clearly and, with little or no irony, comment on the matters he sees as important to him.

The unquestioned No. 2 leader in Belarusian music of the '90s was N.R.M. During my first year at Minsk art college, I met a long-haired senior student, Liavon Volski, in a chemistry lab. He was trying to convince his chemistry professor that those living in Belarus should speak Belarusian. He was saying simple things in a beautiful, inspirational way.

N.R.M. stayed in my perception as a band of this bright idea, although I sometimes did not share their musical aesthetics. Later, in addition to the vigorous N.R.M., Liavon founded Krambambulia, the band that revealed him as a lyrical author. His lyrics for both projects were of very high quality.

FOLK BANDS

The trendsetters in Belarusian folk music are, undoubtedly, Troitsa, led by Ivan Kirchuk who possesses a unique voice. Troitsa was the first band after Pesnyary that started to present Belarusian folklore in a comprehensive and unique way. This is more of a world music rather than pure rock. Every note has been written by the dint of hard work: Kirchuk, a professional ethnographer himself, goes on expeditions to study regional and local traditions. The authenticity of his songs is underlined by the meticulous preservation of the peculiarities of the pronunciation from the places of origin of songs.

Despite certain charisma of such remarkable albums as *Son-trava, Sem'* and *Zimushka,* my favorite CD of Troitsa is *Zhar-zhar*. Its experimental sound differs greatly from the one that the audience could hear at the band's concerts. By the way, it seems that Kirchuk has never fully "fathered" this recording, since he sees it mostly as a result of the "terror" sound design implemented by sound-editor Andrei Zhukov.

Another band, Akana, consists of three female singers who fuse folk music with modern music genres, from jazz to the "beats" of Ukrainian DJs. The band participated in several international projects. Where else would Belarusian folklore draw attention, if not abroad? During their recent joint project with Swiss musicians, Akana played several concerts across Belarus. Currently, Irena Kotvitskaya, the band's leader, is working on a new project with Aleksey Vorsoba from the Belarusian band Port Mone.

One should not forget about Stary Olsa which plays medieval music. Its members participate in different kinds of "role playing" and reconstruction events. Some time ago, the band presented a highly professional and resourceful arrangement of *Polatski Sshytak* (a medieval music collection discovered by the Belarusian researcher Adam Maldzis). The front-man of the band Dmitriy Sosnovskiy, a devotee by nature, actively promotes medieval music. He also attempts to be the producer of a more modernist

band Litvin Troll which strengthens the sound of medieval and folk instruments with electric guitars.

FREAK BANDS

The genre of absurdity, starting from Nikolai Gogol, as well as such classics as Kharms and Beckett, is looking into the nature of a small person, who exists in his own small world full of really exotic fantasies. I am talking about talented "freaks," of course. The common "freak" grimace works mostly for drunk audiences and does not not raise the "low genre" to the level of art.

There is no doubt that the best Belarusian freak-band is the freak-cabaret Serebryanaya Svad'ba. Its front-woman Sveta Ben, joined by a small professional orchestra, has been writing impressive verses for a long time. Now these verses have finally got impersonated on-stage. Benka's (a *tender* nickname given to her in music circles) directing education is evident in her inventive work with plentiful requisites that complement her singing in the name of a simple-minded "foxy." By the way, the front-woman of Serebryanaya Svad'ba likes "acutely theoretical" literature, such as books by Mikhail Bakhtin. It means that she can generally predict the images that will appear in the viewer's head.

The Rocker Jocker cabaret duo, two vivid, relatively cynical characters presented by Maksim Siryi and Mikhei Nosorogov, reminds me of a simpler version of Tom Waits. Nosorogov accompanies himself on a small guitar-ukulele, while Maksim Siryi plays the standard accordion. The band shows off their rather roughish aesthetics and picturesque appearance.

One more "positive" freak band is Kassiopeya which plays the so-called "special pop" music, in other terms described as retro-futurism. Their *Shchupaltsa s planety X* happily adjoins the nostalgic Soviet worldview. This music style is well-received in Russia, which is torn apart between hope for the civilized future and the memories about the USSR idyll. Sometimes they play electro-pop; sometimes they play hard electric punk.

ROCK BANDS

I would like to point out Petlya Pristrastiya and Krasnye Zviozdy from the whole variety of Belarusian rock bands. Petlya Pristrastiya has many interesting and controversial features: "scribbler's" title, tenacious texts, appropriately non-formal music, and apparent lightness and easiness. The front-man of the band, Ilya Cherepko-Samokhvalov looks like the antipode to what a "normal" rock band front-man should look like. His constant self-doubt turns him from a rock hero into just a human being. It seems that he gets his energy and inspiration from his own shyness. As a result, exhaustively ironic texts are born.

Krasnye Zviozdy's name ("red stars" – *translator's note*) suggests that it should be playing some nostalgic dirty mid-Russian punk like Grazhdanskaya Oborona, especially when its frontman Vladimir Selivanov provokes people to compare his band to the latter. Fortunately, Krasnye Zviozdy play something much more musically absurd and refined. They destroy yet one more classical stereotype by refusing to play classic punk: they don't pretend that they don't know how to play. So, they are not limited by some visible borders that would nail the band to any specific music style. Therefore, their music can and must be listened to.

INSTRUMENTALISTS

Gurzuf and Port Mone bands can be identified in this segment. It seems at a glance that the bands are identical, since both front-men play the accordion. However, it is quite the opposite – the bands are totally different.

Gurzuf's Egor Zabelov is a talented composer who can write clear music phrases and sharp melodies. He knows how to change the texture and hold intrigue in his music. Recently, he started to experiment with various electronic gadgets. The other member of the band, the drummer Artiom Zalessky, is one of the most unconventional Belarusian musicians. Artiom leads his own drum line rather than just accompanies. To my relief, these musicians manage not to work anywhere more and earn a living only playing music.

Port Mone has been on stage since 2005. Alexey Vorsoba, though, started his music career much earlier. He was the frontman of the instrumental Good Man's Band (Lesha-the-Good-Man was his nickname). Port Mone's music is built on the principles of landscape design: all hills, knolls and hollows are marked by musical thickening and attenuation, fading and explosions. It has its own structure, logics, and clear regularity.

INTELLECTUAL MUSIC BANDS

There are at least two bands in Belarus whose music, according to an average consumer, is something *meaningless*. The BOM band's name is an abbreviation of "magical unicellular music" (*Bolshyebnaya Odnokljetochnaya Muzyka – BOM – translator's note*), while Knyaz Myshkin plays intuitive jazz.

Anton Krivula, aka Batman of the Great Ukraine, aka Stereo Pal, aka Jean--Zeppelin, founded several branches of BOM in Russia and Belarus. His style was born in the moment when Anton noticed that the sound has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. So, the music can be created using different overtones of notes of one and the same tone, repeated over and over again. Therefore, listeners perceive time very differently (for instance, when I was listening to BOM, I had an impression that they were playing for an hour, while their program was only twenty minutes long).

Anton plays quite many concerts in Russia. I remember that once he wrote to me: "Come play with us in Moscow. They know us very well. Everybody hates us already."

Leonid Narushevich, as the chief inspirer of Knyaz Myshkin, is a clever and uncompromising man. The best compliment he has ever heard was paid by a musician from his own band: "Leonid, apparently you can play the guitar very well." True, Narushevich has reached such a level of mastery that it seems to be practically invisible. On the face of it, the band plays something very vague. But this is vague only for an untrained listener. Close your eyes, put on their CD, and you will immediately notice the "ribs" of the music form. I am not trying to say that Knyaz Myshkin's music is mathematically calculated. I think that musicians feel the structure by their spinal cord.

I once played with Knyaz Myshkin. On my side, it was pure intuitive improvisation. To my shame be it said, this was one of my least fortunate

concerts: I got trapped by modulations, chromaticity downfalls, and changing measure. The band's musicians had no problems, though.

REGIONAL BANDS AND ASSOCIATIONS

The "Provincial" approach to music, unlike the so-called metropolitan approach, is characterized by greater attention to music itself, i.e. deeper analysis of the musical material. By the way, I do not mean that "regional" bands are in any way peripheral in the musical process.

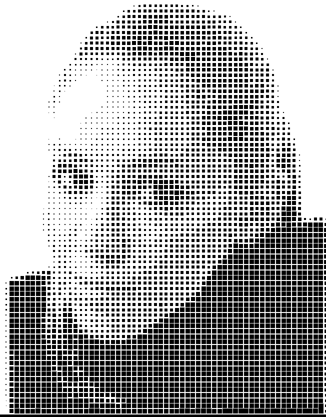
The largest regional center of music is Mogilev. The Center of Live Rock community allows to morally support local bands playing the so-called "Russian rock." One of the most important local bands is Serdtse Duraka, led by a very talented poet Timofey Yarovikov. Quite recently a band called Gluki emerged there; its musicians are now part of a new English-language project Acute.

When I played in Mogilev, I was surprised by the level of attention that the local public paid not even to me and Atmoravi, the nominal headliners from Minsk, but to the local Kalachikom Ryadom band (by the way, a very good one) playing before us. I have heard such high-quality silence only in philharmonic halls before.

This modest, far from complete, list shows that currently Belarus has a wide spectrum of music genres. At the same time, due to the relative isolation of Belarus, those bands have their own unique intonation which cannot be met anywhere else. In other words, we have normal underground music life that Europe is yet to discover.

SERGEY PUKST

Belarusian contemporary literary process resembles a human body with "pain points," with authors still facing the problems with the freedom of thought and the relations with the authorities, publishers, and readers.



MARGARYTA ALIASHKEVICH

THE PAIN POINTS OF THE BELARUSIAN LITERARY PROCESS

Every Belarusian wrote verses at some point of his or her life. Many covered several notebooks with writing. The issue here is that the majority of my fellow Belarusians regard as poetry anything that is written in column and rhymed. This brings a bunch of problems for the literary process as a whole.

THE NATION OF POETS (PLEXIA)

The biggest problem is that poetry is "quadratic." If one opens a literary periodical, one will see only even diametric quatrains with the alternating or enclosed rhyme style – as if one would deliberately follow the "one size fits all" approach. No one cares that already in the beginning of the 20th century Maksim Bahdanovich, referring to the work of the philologist and researcher Viachaslau Rahoysha, invented 93 kinds of stanzas, while at the end of the same century Ales' Razanau bended the form of the verse in all

possible ways. Razanau invented *zlomy* (*short essays on the nature of poetry – translator's note*), *versety* (*verses that combine several literary genres – translator's note*), *vershakazy* (*verses that are built around multiple forms of one and the same verse – translator's note*) and other new poetic forms. Adan Hlobus and many others wrote refined haiku and tankas. Andrei Khadanovich easily wrote a book of limericks; Viktar Zhybul published several collections of palindromes; Viktar Lupasin mocked all static forms of the verse… No one cares that Vital Ryzhkou wins all possible poetic slams in Belarus and abroad, while Anton Frantsishak Bryl'… The list of those who posture the form of our verse in all decent and indecent ways could be much longer. However, if one opens a periodical – and I mean by that mostly state periodicals that reflect (common) people's taste in poetry – he or she will see only "quadratic" verses. Publishing the crown of the crowns of sonnets equals to the heroic deed, while verses without rhyme are treated with suspicion. One literary critic even called free verse "a disease brought to our poetry from the West."

Yakub Kolas was a genius not just because he described the rural life in details. In *Novaya Zyamlya* he rhymed and made rhythmic the national mentality of Belarusians. Profoundness, solidness, diligence, adherence to tradition – all these features are placed between iambic lines, united by clerihew rhymes that put the novel verse on a new level. By a twist of fate, Kolas became a giant bronze statue on the capital's central square, while his other colleagues were not so lucky. Uladzimer Dubouka, whom another known Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala called the Belarusian Pushkin, was in a constant search for the new forms of poetry, inventing a "poetry combine" that fused several literature genres, diverse meters and forms of rhymes. He got 25 years of forced labor in a Soviet work camp. Paulyuk Shukaila, Shashalevich brothers and many other poets were erased from our national memory, so we still have to bring them back.

The poetry is "quadratic" not only by form. It has some thematic quadriga too. For instance, every poet feels obliged, sooner or later, to write about Motherland (options: Mother, Language), Nature, Poetry and, of course, Love that continues to be the main fuel for Belarusian poetic inspiration. True, more and more young poets such as Vika Trenas, Volha Hapeyeva, Maryja Martysevich, Ihar Kulikou and others, transform verses into a kind of an intellectual game. Still, they are treated as youngsters that butt with elders, just like the members of *Maladniak* community were at odds with *Nasha*

Niva in the '20s. It is commonly thought that after they outgrow their own intellectual narcissism, they will transform into pastoral poets, celebrating the view of cornflowers in the rye or grasshoppers on the meadow.

In addition to that, Belarusians do not trust professionals. When a person wants to build a house, he will call construction workers; when someone is ill, he calls a doctor, a professional. Not a Belarusian, though. "We weren't born yesterday," "it's not rocket science," etc. Furthermore, verbal constructions are no skyscrapers, while writing is not a disease with some exotic name. Literary criticism is treated not as a profession, but as a way to get even with literature. The writing itself is not regarded as a profession as well. A normal man should have a decent job at a factory or own a business, while a normal woman should be married, rather than make a living by writing.

The worst part about the "nation of poets" is that it has no readers. Everyone writes, but just a few are able to *read* poetry. The best part about it is our potential. So, let's see if quantity changes into quality.

THE GAP (PERINEUM)

They say, if you take two Belarusians, you will get three political parties. At least, some diversity! Every nation has poets and verse-mongers (although in the "nation of poets" scribbling becomes an endemic disease). What about state and non-state publications? Journalism professors at Belarusian State University used to joke that anything that is published in the state of Belarus belongs to the state. So, we gave the "non-state press" a new name, "independent press." This new term, however, had a problem with an antonym. We used the "official/oppositional" pair for a while, but then the situation got complicated, since the opposition became blamed by the "official" press that used to refer to it only in quotation marks and in an insulting manner. Then we started dividing periodicals into "right" and "wrong" ones, but we soon got confused, unable to distinguish "friends" from "foes" and to define what is "right."

These wedges are evident in the literary process. There are several state literary periodicals, such as *Polymya, Nyoman, LiM, Maladosts* and others, which have inherited a rich Soviet fortune: the nation-wide distribution

system, mandatory subscription for state agencies, state grants, and some brand recognition. Non-state ones like *ARCHE-Pachatak, Dziejaslou, Litaraturnaya Belarus, Verasen'* and others, inherited non-format authors that cannot or do not want to write "quadratic" verses, as well as demanding, well-read and spoiled by the Internet readers, often Minskers. State publications follow the unspoken rule of non-mentioning the "wrong" authors. Non-state, in their turn, try so hard to give assistance to the most suppressed authors that sometimes do not have time to notice other "wrong" ones.

There is an invisible but very real gap between two camps of authors. Order violators get fired from "official" jobs. It would seem impossible to develop literature in conditions when virtually no one can see the bigger picture or *stay on the surface* long enough. Still, fortunately, there are some literary critics and experts who manage to write about both groups of authors. Critics Leanid Halubovich, Iryna Shauliakova and Tsikhan Charniakevich are among them, as well as literary experts Piatro Vasiuchenka, Mikhas' Skobla and others. The life is not treating them too well, though, as stones can fly at them from both sides at any time.

The real plague of two sides is cultivation of some special topics that will be praised by critics despite the quality of writing, such as Mother Russia (for one camp) or the fight with dictatorship (for the other). However, bad literature is bad literature, whatever topic it chooses.

Still, no one can ban interested readers from reading (fingers crossed; they have already started to arrest for clapping in the streets, so they may start punishing for "wrong" magazines in one's hands). So, the more publications are created, the better. If someone is recognized by both camps, he or she can be immediately called a classic. Those "classics" can write in a different manner and have different viewpoints. Very generally speaking, Alhierd Bacharevic is writing in a very thick, complicated and refined manner, looking into the depth of human soul and studying a person's relations with the absurd society. Ludmila Rubleuskaya, in her turn (again, very broadly speaking), popularizes the national myth with the help of historical and cloak-and-sword genres, writing in a very easy and clear way.

The gap between state and non-state publications is one of many in which the literary process can fall. Among others are the split of Belarusians into "normal" and Belarusian-speaking, and the chronic misunderstanding between *normal people* and writers. Critics name loneliness one of the

major topics of Belarusian literature over the last twenty years. A lonely independent Belarusian-speaking writer is like a duck to water.

THE LANGUAGE AND THE "LANGUAGE" (TONGUE, LIPS)

It was thought before that flagellant Russian-speaking chlamydia could be transmitted exclusively via sexual contacts. However, the recent research proves that this muck can be picked up from grooming means, from the circle of communication or can be inherited. So, to remain healthy, Belarusian-speaking Belarusians have to put on environmental suits, be careful in selecting partners and remember *where their towels are*.

Russian-speaking chlamydiosis is a chronic disease of civic consciousness. One feels uneasy to talk about it, while it is bearable (many do not feel any pain at all) and is very difficult to treat; so, practically no one treats it, and it continues to spread around. Linguistic chlamydiosis, just as the common one, leads to sterility. If I were a doctor, I would prescribe coercive Belarusification to the Belarusian nation. I would recommend paying higher salaries and giving better jobs to Belarusian speakers, introducing fines and general contempt for those who process their documents in Russian. I would introduce a special Belarusian language exam for any candidate for government or media positions. I would ignore Russian-speaking politicians, and I would recommend introducing only one state language. Unfortunately, the point is missed, and one cannot hope for a targeted and effective Belarusification that would go on for at least as long as Russification went (seventy years plus around two hundred years more). So, our brightest minds, our writers, fight the disease as far as they can.

There are several coping strategies here. One of them was started by *Nasha Niva* editor Vaclav Lastowski and was successfully followed by writer Uladzimir Karatkevich in the second half of the 20th century. Its central idea is to wrap the story in such a tasty layer that the patient would swallow it together with the language, which is the main active ingredient. Some writers, such as Yury Stankevich and Alyona Belanozhka, deliberately dilute the Belarusian language with some Russian words. Another coping strategy developed by, for instance, Lukash Kaliuha, dates back to the linguistic purism of the 1920s. It takes pearls of culture-specific vocabulary as well as

the archaic and dialect lexicon, dissolves them in the acetum of authentic syntax, and densifies all this Belarusian stuff into emulsion. Then, the old orthography, such as tarashkevitsa or lacinka, should be added into the cup, and this mixture is ready for intravenous treatment of patients. Not only prose writers (Siargei Balakhonau) and poets (Mikhas' Bayaryn, Yuras' Patsiupa) work in this field. There are many adherents of this treatment among translators, as well: Vasil' Syomukha, Maryna Shoda, Ales' Razanau, and others. The third coping strategy is based on the linguistic games theory. Some, like Zmitsier Vishniou and Artsiom Kavaleuski play with paronymous ataraxia. Others, like poet Andrei Khadanovich, prose writers Uladzislau Akhromenka and Maksim Klimkovich, and critic Iryna Shauliakova, choose intertextuality.

Some writers undoubtedly have language immunity, so they write the way they feel it. Among them are Ryhor Baradulin, Natallia Kuchmel, Piatro Vasiuchenka, Barys Piatrovich. All their efforts, though, are futile on the national level. We do not have literary agents who would chase Belarusian readers with Belarusian-language books the way nurses chase health resorts' clients. Our brightest minds can lead endless debates on some linguistic nuances on the Internet, deciding whether one should get his *ass* or *arse* out of somewhere. The dark minds of the majority will continue calling the language of the title nation a "language," rudely introducing quotation marks into the context. Everyone who does not speak Belarusian feels obliged to tell Belarusian-speakers his or her opinion on the Belarusian language. When Belarusians hear that someone speaks Belarusian they can react in different ways. For example: "Wow, your Belarusian is just great! Where did you learn it?" Another option: "You're doing the right thing; I also believe that we need to know our language." Or: "Hey, you, are you one of those lousy oppositionists?"

The less Belarusian-speaking writers we have, the higher is the threat, since everyone who writes in Belarusian gets his or her personal nimbus or indulgence issued by nationally conscious critics. Let's take a Russian-speaking writer who writes a Belarusian-language book. How can one criticize this book, if such a writer ought to be supported, praised and attracted to the Belarusian-language environment? Alternatively, let's take some Belarusian-speaking author that wrote some rubbish. Don't you dare touch him?! He masters a new genre, or even a whole new artistic trend, or

something else that we have not had yet in our discrete (or speeded-up, if you wish) development and something that we definitely must have.

THE PICTURE THAT KILLS (EYES)

According to the study by the sociologist Rotman, published by *Nyoman* magazine in 2007, Belarusians read less in the new century. The policy of *glasnost*, introduced in the late '80s, brought enormous circulations and an unbelievable growth in reading. It also brought the devaluation of the printed word, which in turn caused the drop in print-runs of fiction literature in the late '90s. The policy of bilingualism was confirmed by the referendum of 1996, which made the Russian language a state language alongside Belarusian. It was de-facto the continuation of the Russification policy, since state officials give advantage to the Russian language. When they hear Belarusian, they start shouting about bilingualism, while there's not a trace of Belarusian-language forms in their bureaus.

As a consequence, an average circulation of a literary magazine nowadays is one to four thousand copies. Poetry collections are published in three to five hundred copies. Prose can sometimes get more. At the same time, there is over a million Belarusian internet-users in Minsk alone. Naturally, not all of them read Belarusian literature on the Web; not everyone reads Belarusian at all. Still, they have this possibility, and the Belarusian-language segment of the Web is growing.

The pioneer of the Belarusian literature web sphere is litara.net which promises to tell the story of everything that takes place in Belarusian literature. There are many electronic libraries. I would recommend to check knihi.com, the Belarusian bookshelf (a Belarusian e-library) with a handy navigation panel and popular with students. Another good resource is bellib.net (Belarusian e-books library) which hosts translations of Belarusian literature into other languages and translations of foreign literature into Belarusian. One of the most interesting recent projects is prajdzisvet.org, a resource for translators. E-shops prastora.by and knihi.by sell Belarusian books. Belarusian literature is available in other stores as well, such as oz.by or vilka.by. Libraries, shops, and writers' personal pages host mostly classical

literature, while the contemporary literary process has until recently been reflected in blogs and is now moving into social networks.

The best way to familiarize oneself with Belarusian literature is to visit the kamunikat.org library. It hosts scanned copies of publications and one of the richest collections of Belarusian periodical publications that I have ever encountered. It also publishes daily conversations on Belarusian literature and culture from radio broadcasts, informs about new titles in the Belarusian publishing market, and lists the names and biographies of Belarusian authors, including poets, writers, historians, and publicists. Another handy feature of Kamunikat is that it has recently started to publish books in ePub format which is easy to use with e-readers.

E-books make one more point for our acupuncture. There are not so many publishers who gain profit from Belarusian-language fiction. I could count them on both my hands: Igor Logvinov, Zmitser Kolas, Galiyafy Publishing House, Medysont Publishing House, Belaruski Knihasbor, Harvest, Mastatskaya Litaratura, all of them repine the Internet which takes away their last penny. Still, on the other hand, it is much easier to publish and distribute an electronic book than a traditional one. This benefits writers who often lack money to publish their own dissident masterpieces while receiving a state grant for publishing is a Soviet myth that disappeared together with glasses in the city soda vending machines.

Reduced time between the writing and publishing of the text, as well as lack of control over distribution, is well received by the majority of the literary process' participants. However, those pleasures are costly. Let us leave aside all those sentiments about the smell of paper and printing ink or any other aesthetic satisfaction that is caused by the book as an artifact. The problem is that Internet-authors prefer to save on the design, editing, and proofreading of their books, which would be unavoidable in the traditional publishing process. The easiness and speed of publication spoil people. Anyone can declare himself a great writer nowadays. Creating a blog, gathering Internet fans, and passing any movement of thought for a great discovery which would be receiving favorable comments is just a piece of cake!

Literary criticism is absent on the institutional level. Those who choose to engage into literary criticism are not in favor of scavenging the Web in search of artistic pearls. Sometimes, critics Paval Abramovich, Hanna

Kislitsyna, and writer Maryja Martysevich make such attempts. Even if philanthropists appear, no one really listens to them. So, you can smash my face into the wall, on which the number of unique visits to the blogs of mentioned and unmentioned critics and popular Internet-writers is scribed, but I will not treat our web discussions as anything else than childish games. The Internet's potential is great, but there the way from potency to conception and to actual birth is really long.

Cause of Death: Modesty (Instead of Epicrisis)

I should be praising our literature, giving you more and more names and book titles. I should be happy for the renaissance of the writing, taking place recently despite the totally hostile language and political conditions. However, the notorious Belarusian self-torment prevents me from doing that. Probably, the philosopher and culture expert Valiantsin Akudovich was right in his *Kod Adsutnastsi*, which was set to become a cult book but failed to do so due to the above-described circumstances. Belarusians, he says, have been deprived of many things for so long that they are afraid to boast now in order to avoid someone stealing their goods from them again. So, this is our destiny. We will continue hiding our precious fortune under the wooden floor.

MARGARYTA ALIASHKEVICH

Modern Belarusian cinema is a mystery. While Belarusian directors create decent films, many Belarusians believe that Belarusian cinematography is non-existent.



ANDREI RASINSKI

DAWN AT COLONIAL RUINS

Modern Belarusian cinema is a mystery. Few if any heard of it, even fewer watched it. Many Belarusians believe that there is no Belarusian cinema at all. Although Belarusian films do exist and some of them have decent commercial potential, they have little or no viewers.

The first sprouts of independent filming that grew in the early '90s have wilted. Films are made by Belarusfilm, the main state-funded studio. Belarusian Videocenter, the business card of the Ministry of Culture, has been active since the '90s.

The film distribution system has commercialized and become dependent on Russian companies bringing the latest Hollywood hits to Belarus. But, although it lets out on lease its studios to Russian soap opera makers, Belarusfilm exists independently of the modern market. No one, except for film directors, cares about viewers; this makes government officials suspicious. The Belarusian film studio reflects the country that has stuck in the past. Bureaucratic "making use of the budget," as well as control over artists, are more important for the officials than the box office and artistic value of a film.

Still, films continue to be made, despite the unfavorable conditions. It is, therefore, interesting to take a look at the clash between "exemplary" official films and the underground Belarusian culture, which is fully revealed in cinematography.

THE VIOLENT STRUGGLE: THREE TRENDS IN BELARUSIAN CINEMATOGRAPHY

The first trend regards Belarus as a Western Russian province. The majority of films of this trend were produced during early Lukashenko's rule. The most representative are films by offensive propagandist Yury Azaronak: ***Nianavisc': Dzietsi khlusni*** (1995); TV programs ***Tayemnya spruzhyny palityki*** (2001), ***Kanspiralogiya*** (2005), ***Dukhounaya Vayna*** (2006). However, beginning from 2001, the "Western Russian" aesthetics has become mummified. Its last occurrence was ***Brestskaya Krepasts'*** (2010), made by the Film Studio of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The film belongs to Russian cinematography.

The second trend focuses on films about some unknown places, where it is impossible to figure out the country of action. Such "homeless" stories are ideal for avant-garde experiments and animation introductions; however, in authoritarianism they have become conflict-free, just like in late Stalin's years.

Finally, the last trend gaining momentum is Belarusian-centric.

WESTERN RUSSIAN TREND, WARSPLOITATION, TRASH-OFFICIALISM

The advent of Lukashenko's era was marked by ***Syn za bats'ku*** (1995) film. That "Western Russian" flick was directed by actor Mikalai Yaromenka Jr. He played in his own film and invited his father Mikalai Yaromenka Sr. to play the surgeon bugged by a gang of criminal businessmen. Joining forces with his son and village neighbors who always have some weapons in the backyard, the main character crushes the gang, led by a mean guy who suspiciously reminds Zianon Pazniak, the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front.

The storyline of "bad democrats" was continued in Siarhei Sychou's sluggishly retrograde melodramatic film ***Pakul my zhyvyja*** (2008). A former komsomol activist stays "high-principled" after the "tragic break-up of the Soviet Union." She falls in love with a turncoat colleague who betrayed his principles and burned his komsomol card. The chaste and pure heroine readily and persistently spends the money of this democrat-businessman, but agrees to have sex with him only after he gets poor.

The peak of the Western Russian trend was ***V avguste 44-go***, a 2001 film by Mikhail Ptashuk based on Uladzimer Bahamolau's book *Momant Istsiny*. Featuring Russian actors and the military grandeur, the film virtually sucked out the budget of Belarusfilm. It stands out for a great teamwork of actors and skillful direction, which, however, never left the 1970s. According to the script, in August of 1944, a group of military counter-intelligence officers from the NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) is tasked to find German agents who send coded radio messages from the territory of the recently liberated Belarus. Poles are presented in the film as suspicious aliens; Belarusians are neither fish nor fowl. Only the Russian agents from Lubianka are "our guys."

Belarusfilm persevered in making war movies with neo-Stalinist content, featuring KGB agents and merciless warriors as positive characters. Belarusian warsploitation means exploiting war topics in low-quality movies despite the energetic resistance from the side of viewers.

Children poisoners, recruited by Gestapo, get re-recruited by NKVD. The main heroine is the hysteric agent in a tight-fitting uniform (***Radzima albo smierts'***, 2007, by Alla Krynitsyna). In ***Dniaprouski rubezh*** (2009) by Dzianis Skvartsou the main heroine of the heroic defense of Mahiliou enjoys heroic poking of gun wounds, lyrically reasoning about marital bliss. Women in Peter Kryvastanenka's film ***Jashche pra vaynu*** (2004) wear overcoats over bare skin.

Trash-official films based on Stalinist plots are intolerably boring. However, school students who were forced to view Skvartsou's ***Shchyt Aichyny*** (2007) were grateful to their teachers. The film, where Western spies try to undermine the combat readiness of modern Belarus, features a long erotic scene.

One of the pretenders to the title of the worst warsploitation film is ***Glybokaya plyn'*** (2005) by Ivan Paulau. However, it cannot surpass Yury

Biarzhytski's ***Vam zadannie*** (2004). The film, describing fascist capitalists--saboteurs and good guys from the KGB, is so bad that even the scribbler Mikalai Charhinets, who authored the book the movie is based on, was disgusted.

Svezhyna z salutam by Ivan Paulau is a trash-official comedy. After its premiere in 2001, it was advertised as a film in the Belarusian language. The story of villagers who decide to slaughter a piggy is part of a hard and uninventive ethnographic ghetto, allowed in Lukashenko's Belarus.

PLACELESS CINEMA

Another Paulau's comedy, ***Na spinie u chornaha kata*** (2008) represents the second, conditionally conflict-free trend. The film is a cheerfully moron showcase of Lukashenko's glamour. Two rampaging elderly Stalinists win a lottery and travel to Minsk under the guidance of two angels. The film is distinguished by sterility, the Russian language in villages and allusions to a "good king." Youngsters envy the luck of old guys and sing military songs with them. The officials from the presidential administration personally called the Russian singer Philip Kirkorov to invite him to play himself. The starring child actor was the granddaughter of the dictator, Vika Lukashenko.

There is no sign of the place of action in Alexander Yafremau's melodrama ***Pavadyr*** telling the story of a blind woman and a poor loser who falls in love with her. All conflicts in the film are hushed up, despite the original intention of the script-writer Alyaksandar Kachan. The happy optimism and inspirational struggle of good with the best dominates the film.

Cold drama ***Insayt*** (2009) by Renata Hrytskova shows conflicts, while actor play is fiercer and livelier, mostly due to Bahdan Stupka. Still, the film just tells the story of glamour incest with no geographic association.

Conditional territory is good for avant-garde experiments of women. ***Vonkavaye. Vyvaratnae.*** (2000) by Karyna Antsipenka tells the monologue of a frightened female subconscious, built on bright and loud details with masks painted with make-up. The movie is biting and harsh, just like painstakingly filmed cactuses and tender kittens with lion's roar. Such a study of female fears triggered inadequate reaction of some viewers who loudly

wished to see the film "feet first together with its author." However, it was positively received at the UN-supervised international film festival in Canada.

Fantastic and magical plots form a separate kingdom. ***Padzienne uverkh*** (1998) by Alena Trafimenka is about a sick boy who escapes into his own dreams. Unfortunately, it is over-elaborated by author's intentions and unclear script; however, the music by Uladzimer Kandrusevich is an advantage.

Alena Turava's ***Navahodniya pryhody u lipieni*** (2008) is based on a sloppy and archaic script as well. A positive thing about the film is that children's adventures in the virtual space are illustrated by special effects new to Belarus. Despite some flaws in the script, this year's work by Turava (who is, by the way, the daughter of the Belarusian classic Viktar Turau) ***Ryzhyk u zalustroui*** is a wonderful fairytale about country Niadaliya where one can get via an ordinary Minsk library.

Evil prince Mortsis of Niadaliya seized the power and bewitched all mirrors in a way that they turned anyone who looked into them into a shadow. Only the crown princess, who appears to be a joyful Belarusian schoolgirl, can save the country. So, she starts a dangerous journey. The squares of Niadaliya, devastated by evil and filled with phantoms, greet their princess; one can easily see the parallel with sterile movie streets of authoritarian Minsk. Twins and lookalikes, portraits and live walls, strange metamorphoses in the kingdom of mirrors and reflections make the question on Belarusian identity very relevant. As heroes themselves, the country hovers between two universes.

Modern Belarusian animation is incarnated metaphysics with children's images and magic paints. It depends on artists who are neither known nor disturbed by the officials.

Iryna Kadziukova's ***Festivities cycle. Kalyadnae*** (1994), ***Dziauchynka z zapalkami*** (1996), ***Dziunaya viachera u Vigiliyu*** (1999), and ***Prytcha pra Rastvo*** (2000) are based on the fairy tales by Sasha Cherny and Hans Christian Andersen. They are eagerly distributed by Christian activists. However, no one is able to see those wonderful and masterful animation films on TV. ***Syastra i brat*** (2002) is a fairy tale with the paradoxical usage of modern quotations. ***Legenda pra ledi Gadzivu*** (2004) inspired viewers at film festivals.

In contrast, films with budgets big by Belarusian standards are heavily censored by the officials. This brings destructive aesthetic effects.

The production of ***Anastasiya Slutskaya*** (2003) by Yuri Yelkhov was under personal control by Alexander Lukashenko. The film describes the duchess that defended Slutsk against Tatars; with censorship, it turned into a clumsy ideological construction with wrongfully compressed naked scenes.

Ecstatic reactions, the struggle of good against evil, as well as decorations with the Pahonia coat of arms left out (this was specifically requested by the officials), make the film a conventional work free from any conflict. Conflicts, if any, concern mostly the "bad" nobility wanting some "freedoms" or external aggressors (pitted by the nobility). The main characters together with the crowd stand united in their protection of the monarch's power. The authoritarian rule knows only the rule of agreement.

ATTACK BY BELARUSIAN MYSTERIES

Andrei Kudinenko gave battle to the artificial trash-officialism and conflict-free "homelessness." Turau's student, Andrei Kudinenko began experimental re-editing in ***Sny Valiantsina Vinahradava*** (1998) dedicated to an avant-gardist persecuted in Belarus. His re-edited ***Planeta XX***, shot in a Belarusian video center, raised sharp irritation. The story of people's games in the 20th century was accused of the "propaganda of fascism and pacifism" at the same time. So, the poetic ***Planeta XX*** was placed on the shelf and was never screened.

To balance the pathetic high-budget film by Ptashuk, Kudinenko teamed up with friends to direct the first mystery novella *Adam i Eva*. Its hero, a military man from Moscow named Shtyrkin, recruits a Belarusian guy Adam to a guerrilla movement. However, Adam is captured by a nymphomaniac Pole Eva (Sviatlana Zielankouskaya, the main character in *Anastassiya Slutskaya*).

The existentially ironic novel was well received in Rotterdam, so Kudinenko got money for its continuation. Based on the script written by Alexander Kachan, Kudinenko filmed the ***Okkupatsiya. Misterii*** feature film (2003) consisting of three interrelated parts (novellas). In the novella *Matsi*, following *Adam i Eva,* a speech-impaired Belarusian woman feeds a wounded German soldier with her breast milk. In *Bats'ka* a boy, thinking that his father came to visit him, betrays his mother and stepfather to partisans who come to take vengeance.

The film's characters talk about Lyubov Orlova and Marlene Dietrich, fused nations and language in a strange and ironic way, while the local Nazi police collaborators discuss Belarusian cinematography. To add fuel to the flames, Kudinenko and Kachan state in the prologue that while Belarusians have finally got their independent state, the nation itself has already disappeared.

A terrible scandal broke. The film was given the distribution license, but it was immediately revoked for the distortion of the "truth about the war" and "negative impact on younger generations." When the film was taken to the festival in Moscow, the war veterans started a campaign, sending letters of disgust to the festival's organizer. A bold stamp was saying "Banned in Belarus" on DVDs in Moscow. The film reached as far as Taiwan. Copies of *Okkupatsiya* were selling mightily on the black market in Belarus. Kudinenko himself was given to understand that there was no way for him to film anything else in Belarus.

The director was forced to move to Moscow. However, he was suddenly invited to Belarusfilm again. This time he was given an opportunity to produce a horror based on his own idea. The most interesting stage of the modern Belarusian cinematography began.

THE THREE KS

Since 2008, three prominent feature film directors have come back to Belarusfilm: Andrei Kudinenko, Alexander Kolbyshau and Alexander Kananovich.

Ironically, the studio director who decided to support the most pro-Belarusian films ever was Uladzimer Zamyatalin, who infamously organized the 1995 shameful referendum (*as a result of that referendum, the Pahonia code of arms and the white-red-white national flag of Belarus were no longer state symbols – translator's note*). Zamyatalin even wrote the final prayer that is read offscreen for Alexander Kolbyshau's *Vauki*.

Alexander Kolbyshau is mostly known as actor. ***Vauki*** (2009) became his feature-length debut. The film is anti-totalitarian. The main character is the prisoner who escapes the train carrying him to Siberia and comes back to his native village. The hunt after him starts. Some fellow villagers want to report him to the authorities, others help him. The plot reminds the viewer

Vasil Bykau's *Ablava*. However, the movie is built on another novel, the one by Alexander Chakmianiou which was banned for fifty years. Kolbyshau has a great bond with actors. The ash and red-colored film is coolishly academic and continues the anti-Stalinist traditions of the '90s.

The hysteric comedy ***Dastisch Fantastisch*** by Ptashuk's student Alexander Kananovich is more fragmented. This is a light-minded movie filmed in acid hallucinogenic colors (a new color correction was tested in the film). It tells a story of a boy with bright red hair who grows a money tree. Gangsters with enema, a prison director and a girl in love are chasing the poor guy.

The movie lacks directorial thoughtfulness. Still, it is a good example of the departure from ideologically controlled law-quality schemes and of free hooliganism. Kananovich has quite a big potential. His degree comedy ***Koler Kachannia*** about a groom who first becomes green and then blue features the sparkling laughter of city squares, air-ballooned cows, a country estate and an orchestra with Liavon Volski playing a Jewish musician in the film.

Finally, ***Masakra*** by Andrei Kudinenko represents the *bulba-horror*, a new genre invented by its author. Fear, laughter and sexuality put on Belarusian clothes. The film distantly refers to Prosper Merimee's *Lokis*. Alexander Kachan wrote the script. The action takes place on Belarusian lands right after the suppression of Kastus Kalinowski's uprising. The adventurer Kazantsau comes to Count Pazurkevich pretending that he will set a price for the library. In reality, he starts hitting at the count's fiancée. The count is, however, is a turnskin bear, so all the guests will have hard times.

Masakra is an anti-colonial film. Kudinenko introduces his favorite linguistic games into it, by mixing the Belarusian, Polish and Russian languages. The movie also features decadent straw decorations made by Artur Klinau and presents a sensible encyclopedia of movie murders. This is our Belarusian Eurohorror.

THE GOLDEN YEARS OF DOCUMENTARIES

Nowadays we live in the golden years of documentaries; these years are probably almost over. The public is mostly familiar with the journalistically ironic ***Zvychainy Prezydent*** by Yury Khashchavatski with his funny main character. However, Belarusian documentary cinematography mostly

concentrates on being rather than on doing. It captures the eternity that is shown in a disappearing mid-era context.

This eternity shows in ***Uva use dni*** (2008) by Mikhail Zhdanouski, which tells about an artist who paints icons on stones and places crosses in Kurapaty (the site of Stalin's crimes). The existential fracture is present in Siarhei Halavetski's ***Medahliad*** (1997) about the life of the elderly in the Chernobyl zone of nuclear pollution.

Undoubtedly, the leaders of Belarusian documentary cinema are Viktar Asliuk and Halina Adamovich. After ***My zhyviem na krai*** and ***Kola***, Viktar Asliuk became the member of the European Film Academy. Villagers and their cows, relocated from one shore to the other, live on the "edge": their village is being washed away by the Nyoman river. The old life is ceasing. The film's heroes remind of the Renaissance elderly by the color of their clothes and of Kusturica's characters by their behavior. *My zhyviem na krai* is not a feature film, though. It is a documentary which records in a stirringly mechanical way possibly the last moments in the life of a disappearing village.

The trilogy *Bozha moy, Zaviadzionka, Muzhchynskaya sprava* by Halina Adamovich looks into the spiritual moments of everyday life. Its characters are the village female artist who makes sculptures of Virgin Mary, the family with many children, and musicians with their mission.

BELARUSIAN CINEMATOGRAPHY ON THE BRINK OF CHANGES

New initiatives appear from nowhere. Belarusfilm property-masters Ihar Asmalouski and Siarhei Siamionau used their own money to produce the tragicomedy ***Pravintsyal*** in 2009. The village beauty queen who is doomed to breed pigs dreams of breaking away and corresponds with a wealthy German, having two other sweethearts at the same time.

The anarchy group Navinki is always good at underground political documentary-making, presenting such films as ***Sluchai z Patsanom*** (2001) or ***Good-bye Bats'ka*** (2006). They also work on movie commixes.

The Magnificat International Catholic Festival of Christian Films and TV Programs expands its sphere of influence as well. The festival, a partner of the Niepakalianava festival, will take place in Belarus for the seventh time

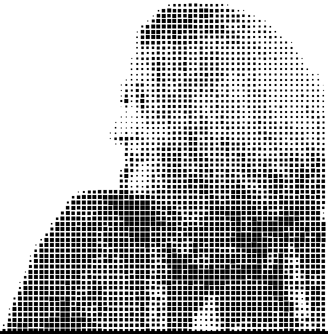
already. Even the Listapad Festival, which was a loose mix-up of Russian cinema veterans for a long time, speaks with European voice nowadays.

Recently, Andrei Kudinenko suggested to Belarusfilm the cinematization of *Shlakthits Zavalnia* (based on Jan Barszczewski's book *Szlachcic Zawalnia*). According to the script written by Artur Klinau, the main character is tempted by Dostoevsky-style demons that bring him nightmares from Jan Barszczewski. In the end, the main character murders czar Alexander the Second. The project was quickly frozen. Thus, cinematography and reality follow each other closely in Belarus.

ANDREI RASINSKI

CULTURE INTERVIEWS

With no support from the state for private cultural initiatives, Belarusian independent non--commercial art platforms are doomed to remain on the level of private undertakings of enthusiasts.



A PLACE WHERE ONE CAN BREATHE

VALENTINA KISELIOVA - INTERVIEW

The "Y" Contemporary Art Gallery is an independent project that developed in 2009 from the Podzemka art gallery in Minsk. Belarusian independent contemporary art is in the main focus of the gallery, which also hosts international conceptual projects and artists' personal exhibitions. The gallery initiates various cultural projects, like the Smart Art contest for young conceptual artists. It is a partner of the Radius of the Zero Anthology of the '00s Art research project and Towards a Modern Museum contest for art critics. The gallery is the venue for local modern art events: discussions, lectures, roundtable meetings, and presentations. At the second international contemporary art fair ARTVILNIUS`11 which gathered around two hundred galleries from eighteen European countries, the "Y" Gallery received the Best Foreign Participant award for its curatorial project "Jana nje mozha skazac NJEBA." The director and curator Valentina Kiseliova talks to us about the "Y" Gallery daily challenges.

A place where one can breathe

Tatiana Artimovich: Valentina, the "Y" Gallery is a follow-up to Podzemka project that gave a start to yours and Anna Chistoserdova's (now "Y's" art director) gallery and curatorial careers. Did you realize from the very beginning what things you'd be doing?

Valentina Kiseliova: When me and Anna set up Podzemka, we did not even think about it in terms of "gallery" format. Anna came up with an idea to open a small designer souvenir shop, selling toys, stationary, interior-design items, etc. I liked the idea, and while brainstorming how to do it, we came to the conclusion that we should sell pieces created by Belarusian designers. We had just finished marking Podzemka spaces and had been in the process of looking for artists and designers, when the first guests, who appeared to be our friends from the artistic environment, started calling our "enterprise" a gallery. Deep down, we were not ready for that, so we introduced the "gallery" term only one and a half years later. Still, already in the very beginning we realized that Podzemka was not just a souvenir stand. The first pieces, displayed for sale, were authored by renowned artists. For instance, we had Tamara Sokolova's ceramics that had never been for sale in Minsk before, and Artur Klinov's *The City of the Sun* series.

We opened in May, and the first exhibition took place just one month later. Our friends suggested that we host a photo exhibition of their friend, the Latvian photographer Victoria Medvedeva. We thought: why not? So, the exhibition opened. The first exposition space consisted of only one 3x5m wall, which divided the halls selling designer clothing and interior pieces. At the end of the day, that "partition" hosted nearly all Monumentalists in the city. The endurance of this wall never stopped surprising us. For instance, when Ruslan Vashkevich brought a dozen of his works, we thought it was impossible to accommodate them. But the wall seemed to be made of rubber, growing in size or shrinking when necessary. In other words, at first, Podzemka became our meeting place; after that, the wall became our exposition space, and then suddenly everything started to make sense. Our energy, enthusiasm, a mature demand for such a venue from Minsk's artistic environment – all of them came together to transform Podzemka into a trendy space that gathered crowds without any special ads. People just kept coming and offering their help. Sometimes, I think it was some collective unconscious. Work in that environment always gave us the feeling of collective energy.

T.A.: So, how did you arrive at the "Y" Gallery format? Obviously different from Podzemka, it was a conscious step towards professional gallery activities.

V.K.: We could finally afford to call ourselves a gallery. Not just one "wall," but the whole venue became an exhibition space. At some moment, we realized that we couldn't fit into twenty-five square meters anymore. We began thinking about a more spacious venue, not forgetting, of course, to weigh our opportunities, since gallery activities in Belarus are still a risky enterprise in terms of profitability. Up to now, we have carried on as a totally non-commercial project. However, we kept thinking about the future, looking for partners. We even went to check factory workshops in Oktyabrskaya street – a ready-for-use arts quarter, indeed!

That's when our friends, who had followed our activities and attended our events for all those years, came over and proposed to open a big real gallery. It was like a miracle to us back then. They helped us get the project started so that in future we could prove ourselves to be financially sustainable. While we were searching for a new venue for more than a year, we also wanted to keep Podzemka's premises. We thought that we would use Podzemka as a "lab" for young artists to play around with and test their crazy ideas. The "Y" Gallery was planned to become a separate space for more professional projects. Unfortunately, we failed to keep Podzemka. In fact, it was a simple story that could happen anywhere in the world: we were removed from Podzemka as an unprofitable operation. Actually, the people who did it did not realize what they had destroyed. Podzemka, which kept its old title plate, was basically degraded into a trivial souvenir shop. Anyway, the legal entity Galereia Art-Podzemka had already been founded by then, and the new venue – formerly a glass bottle recycling center – perfectly met all our demands. Today, this is a unique place which brings together in one gallery an exhibition hall, a bookstore, and a café for visitors, together with a library of literature on contemporary art.

T.A.: From what you have already told us, it looks like you started from scratch, learning gallery business in practice…

V.K.: Yes. In fact, we are still learning. When we started, the first expositions in Podzemka were mounted by artists themselves. Today, we can comfortably

position our exhibitions as curatorial projects. At times, I ask myself the question on how one reaches professionalism. I believe there are several ways of getting to the professional level. The first one is when people can learn a certain system and apply this knowledge confidently in their work. The second, followed by us, is when people self-educate, learning their craft directly in some field and thus becoming professionals. So, today I can comfortably call our operation professional.

T.A.: While there are many positive reviews about your gallery, some people quite heavily criticize the project. How do you deal with criticism?

V.K.: There will always be someone who criticizes one's undertakings. We do accept constructive criticism. However, I can't take seriously the unjustified criticism from people who lack professional skills. For instance, a journalist criticizes the exposition which allegedly exhibits prints. He criticizes those "prints" without even noticing that the works were signed as paintings. Clearly, the journalist, who did not take his time to study the exposition properly, is incompetent himself.

I have heard many people saying that we are not a gallery in the true meaning of the word. I used to ask them: "If you know how to do it properly, why can't you open a role-model gallery on your own?" In fact, we don't feel comfortable to be the only platform in Belarus that works with modern and topical artistic practices. It's always good to exchange knowledge, skills and energy with someone else working in the same field. Instead of supporting, people often reproach us underhand. This is a weird stance, because we did not set up this project solely as a platform for our self-realization. Our project entitled "The 'Y' Gallery Trial in the Tribunal of Public Opinion" aimed to expose this situation. It was just a show, yet we treated it seriously. We asked people to express their opinions publicly on the territory of "Y," not behind our backs. Communication is vital in our gallery's policy. While we are open to dialogue and criticism, I must emphasize that criticism is better received when it is constructive and justified.

T.A.: Why only "Y"? Where are the others?

V.K.: As I said earlier, at this point we are running as a totally non-commercial project. A project like this can crop up only due to enthusiasm and following

personal needs of individuals. This requires a lot of energy. So, many are not ready for that. However, in principle, I am surprised myself, and I don't understand why similar platforms do not emerge. There could have been plenty of venues of diverse formats. Nowadays, when people travel to Western Europe, they have access to a huge number of various cultural spaces. It's a puzzle to me why such spaces do not emerge here.

T.A.: Who are your gallery artists? Why do you choose them?

V.K.: Today there are nine of them: Tamara Sokolova, Sergei Kiryushchenko, Ruslan Vashkevich, Mikhail Gulin, Tonya Slobodchikova, Alexei Lunev, Sergei Shabokhin, Alexander Nekrashevich, Alexei Gubarev. We plan to add two more artists to the list. Why them? Firstly, we are interested in personalities: what he or she wants to express and by what means. In my view, every artist is unique. For instance, Tamara Sokolova and Sergei Kiryushchenko are already established artists who, nevertheless, keep searching in order to move on. Of course, every one of them has individual topics and forms. For example, Alexei Lunev calls himself an individualist artist; he works only on topics that touch him deeply, although through the prism of his emotions, you begin to see into other dimensions of the world. Sergei Shabokhin is just a unique person. One of his professional points of interest is the history of arts. Not only does he apply this knowledge in his projects and proceed with self-education, but he also creates a "product" for those interested in modern cultural practices. Initially, Sergei had a blog, compiling the best and the most important, from his point of view, information on arts. He has now launched *Art Aktivist*, a full-fledged Internet portal on contemporary art, where he posts content from other websites and encourages young people to write their own texts. In this way, he contributes to the development of independent artistic environment in Belarus. That is, we are interested in artists who are constantly in search of new frontiers.

T.A.: What's going on in the gallery these days?

V.K.: We're not just a gallery. Rather, this is the center where many things take place. In the absence of other art platforms, picking and sticking to certain format is virtually impossible. Ideally, there should be many galleries, each one working in their own direction. So, we need to be flexible so

far. Of course, we are interested in modern, topical, and young art. However, we have to think about survival as well. We don't organize specifically commercial exhibitions. We have to raise funds for every particular project. Sometimes, we would like to place works by a certain artist, but our potential sponsors are interested in another artist…

T.A.: Do you mean that you have to maneuver between commerce and art?

V.K.: Yes. There is no other way around yet. Recently, we went to Kaliningrad and met people from the local Contemporary Art Center. They don't have the same problems as we do because this is a state-run center. They don't have to think about funding: they think about projects, goals, and tasks. If we had this kind stability, allowing one to come to work with confidence that rental fees are paid and there is cash for salaries, we could choose our own way even on condition that we would still be the only gallery.

T.A.: Do you get any assistance from the state?

V.K.: The minister of culture Paval Latushka often comes to visit us and gives praise to our projects. I ask myself: is this our national cultural policy or personal interest? True, he gives us verbal support, but officials from the Ministry of Culture do not to rush to offer us assistance or cooperation. Directors of state-owned museums and art experts visit us, but it doesn't convert into any communication or cooperation.

T.A.: In many European countries, private cultural projects enjoy benefits.

V.K.: There are no such conditions here. The presidential decree No. 145 On Taxation Issues in the Field of Culture and Information was passed recently. Having briefly studied this document, I understand that it doesn't make sense yet to change our legal status of a commercial entity, which allows us to have profit, to "public association." Paval Latushka attempts to initiate amendments, changes in legislation on culture. However, in this country, one needs to exercise caution. Even if some unique comprehensive law is ever passed, one needs to take some time monitoring how this law works in practice. There is definitely a moment of mistrust towards the state. Since the government has not supported private undertakings for so many years, it is yet to be known

whether their interest in projects like us should be taken seriously.

T.A.: As a gallerist, how would you comment on the opinion that there is no art market in Belarus?

V.K.: We have artists and the "Y" Gallery in Belarus, so the market exists. Still, it is underdeveloped. There are several reasons for that. On the one hand, the state does not initiate its emergence. On the other hand, people have no initiative to set up art platforms and galleries. The low purchasing power of Belarusians is yet another reason. The middle class with money to spend on art is not strong enough. Besides, art education in Belarus is lagging behind European curriculums and practices, making many local artists and especially critics uncompetitive abroad. Finally, the development of the art market depends on interest generated by one's art in the global context.

T.A.: Your project "Jana nje mozha skazac NJEBA" won the Best Foreign Participant prize at the recent ART VILNIUS festival. Was it the first ever recognition of your gallery at the international art scene?

V.K.: Yes, although it was only our second time at an international art fair. Two years ago we also took part in ART VILNIUS. Had there been the audience award category, we would have won it, we were told. Belarusians were impressive. Usually, only traditional artists would present their expositions, so everyone thought we would be very "Soviet." We showed that contemporary art exists in Belarus, and it turned out to be very interesting. This year, everything came as a surprise. Journalists who were present at the jury's session told us later that the decision on our victory was taken unanimously. We were pleased that appreciation was focused on our curatorial professionalism rather than on the topic of the exhibition. It is important to us, because I am not sure that we could receive such an evaluation of our exhibition from any Belarusian art committee.

T.A.: What was the project's topic?

V.K.: The exposition narrates the situation in Belarus, where artists cannot freely express their thoughts. We asked ourselves: why? If artists can't speak about everything in their country, then what do they speak about? What is

his or her innermost? What is the reaction? Where does an artist depart? As a citizen, he or she can get in the square to protest, but what do they do as artists? As a result, we attempt to show a picture of artist's inner migration, his exposure of the personal inability to say "NJEBA" ("SKY").

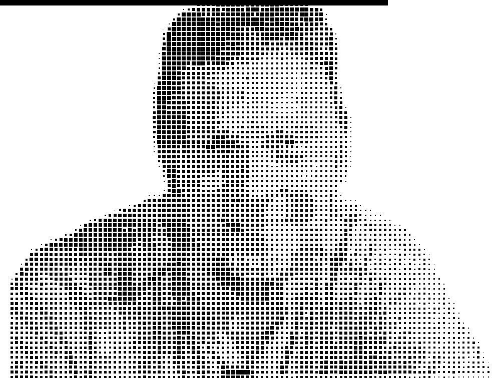
T.A.: Nevertheless, both Belarusian contemporary artists and your projects are often accused of being asocial and ignoring the present of present-day Belarus…

A place where one can breathe

V.K.: I think all our projects are socially topical. For instance, in Kiriyushchenko's unique project "Time Has Come to Deal with the Down-to-Earth Art," he, along with other artists, transformed the actual rural landscape by changing old wooden houses into art objects. In fact, the exposition also included real documents. Somehow, nobody recalls this project any longer. Let's take Shabokhin's project "Philosophy of Masses. Belarusian Neo Pop-Art," which is an extremely socially relevant research project. We always get on target intuitionally. For instance, after the presidential elections in December last year, we organized a Christmas event for children, and at that moment, it was "exhalation" for many. Actually, at times I think that the main idea of our platform is to be a source of energy, a place where one can feel free and comfortable, where one can breathe... Then, there was Zhanna Kapustnikova's exhibition, which lifted many people's spirit with a bright-colored portrait series in the post-election depression atmosphere. After that, Igor Ganzha presented his photo series "Live Human Beings. Minsk" which emphasized those working in the field of culture and trying to change something around them. In the Belarusian context, these projects are very social.

I feel sad when some local art critics start talking about Belarusian art falling short of some kind of international standards. It is not the point whether it lives up to someone's expectations or not. Our art is "different". It doesn't have to be like others. That's what should be studied. In my view, many Belarusian critics and curators themselves fail to realize what our artists offer. This is a problem. How can one define universal contemporary art criteria for all cultures? Context should be taken into account in the first place, and our projects are closely related to the Belarusian context. I am sure about that.

The Belarusian state keeps profitless government-funded publishing houses to execute state-guaranteed orders for literature which serves the interests of power. Ideological loyalty overrides the quality of literature in Belarus.



STATE, WRITER, PUBLICATION

IGOR LOGVINOV – INTERVIEW

Igor Logvinov is a professional publisher with many years of experience. He was the director of publishing centers Mensk and Propilei and headed the publishing department at the European Humanities University in Minsk. In 2000, Igor founded Logvinov, his own independent publishing house, which is recognized today as the most prominent promotion center for Belarusian-language literature.

Ales' Borisevich: Igor, from the very beginning, Logvinov publishing house staked on Belarusian-language literature only. What was the reason for that? Obviously, this is not a profitable project.

Igor Logvinov: By that moment, I quit my job at the publishing house of the European Humanities University and was thinking what to do next. In principle, I realized that my only skill was to publish books. "What books and where?" I was thinking when I got introduced to the young Belarusian writer Zmitser Vishnev and Bub-Bam-Lit (*a Belarusian literary movement, founded in 1995, which focuses on post-modern European literature – author's note*). I got infected by the "drive" of those crazy writers. It was an allusion to some kind of Belarusian Silver Age. I felt like inventing some insane things,

even with no value to anyone, in order to unite a large number of people and make everyone feel happy. I wouldn't say I was a big fan of Belarusian literature. I grew up in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic where the language was either *urban* or *rural*. Belarusian was a *rural* language. Later, I realized that was a mockery of culture, and that I became a "product" of this genocide. Therefore, it was the energy and enthusiasm of Bum-Bam-Lit writers that kick-started the Logvinov Publishing House.

A.B.: Was it easy to launch a publishing project in 2000?

I.L.: If you feel the "drive" that I talked about earlier, it doesn't matter what difficulties you may encounter. When we started up, we had no financial support. All we had was enthusiasm. I felt like Miklouho-Maklai, because I had to be a pioneer and learn from my own experience. In terms of procedures, Belarus, perhaps, is the most difficult country to open a publishing house. However, I was surrounded by many people who were interested and ready to offer support. I believe, that was the reason why everything worked.

A.B.: Apart from enthusiasm, was there any hope that Belarusian-language literature could become a profitable business?

I.L.: A book publishing project implies generating income. However, to me, it was not about business. It was about the authors who tried to do something in the first place, and that was interesting. Revenue generation was of secondary importance. On the other hand, Belarus lived in the epoch of "great illusions" in the early '00s, and national self-consciousness was on the rise. Everything was boiling, and you felt like everything was about to change. At the end of the day, nothing really happened, and the epoch of "large disappointments" came. Nevertheless, a lot of projects, good and useful for Belarusian culture, emerged in that period of great expectations.

A.B.: Belarusian literature finds it difficult to reach the Russian or Western European book market. Very few authors have succeeded. For instance: Alhierd Bacharevic with his *Saroka na šybenicy*, Victor Martinovich with *Paranoia*, Artur Klinov with *Malaja padarožnaja knižka pa Horadzie Sonca*.

How can you explain the fact that Belarusian literature is not in demand by foreign readers?

I.L.: Closedness is one of major illnesses of our literature. This is a kind of literature that, in my view, is unable to create a new meaning. Belarusian authors do not get involved – sometimes deliberately – into the global context. They should stop repeating their mantra: "We, Belarusians, are miserable people subjected to cultural genocide," etc. It's like scratching a wound. As Alexander Ivanov (*director of the Russian publishing house Ad Marginem – author's note*) put it, literature is a story that touches people. The majority of our writers seem to be lacking an inner literary need for creating stories. They have a desire to present themselves and work for the "national project." Yet, they have no desire to be convertible and understood by other people. In my view, Belarusians got consumed by their "wound--scratching." As a result, they got estranged from the world. However, the world has changed. It appears that the problem of nationality is relevant only to Belarus. Belarusian literary men seem to be stranded in the national consciousness that emerged in the 1980–90s. They don't understand that in the rest of the world the problem of language is replaced by the problem of the reproduction of meanings. When I got involved with the literature written in Belarusian, the Belarusian language was an important reference point. This is a totally *different* language; it is organized in a totally different way. It struck me when I learned that it was very easy to translate Heidegger and Kierkegaard into Belarusian, because the thinking and the structure of both languages match. It is much more difficult to translate, for instance, German authors into Russian; translators have to look for compromises. So, the Belarusian language gives a possibility of creating a "message" understood by all Europeans. That's why back in the '00s we thought that with the help of the language, the new vibrant generation could create something *new*. When nothing worked out ten years later, we were not much disillusioned, but we came to the understanding that the Logvinov Publishing House had turned into some kind of a locked-in project. Nobody knew for how long it would stay this way.

A.B.: Is it a problem of the Belarusian language, which remains unclaimed in Belarus, or is it about the content of our literature?

I.L.: I think it is all about closedness. On one hand, local authors have strong anti-Russian sentiments. On the other hand, they do not wish to work under more stringent requirements in Europe, spending more energy and making a greater effort. There is no environment, no competition in Belarus. Since Belarusian writers do not earn high author's fees, they have no motivation. Our book market consumes only 1,000 copies of Belarusian literature. One can't shape a policy of the publishing house on this. Supporting small literatures by the state makes more sense. This type of economy is viable in all countries where small publishing houses receive up to 70% of funding from the state to support national literature. It is non-existent in Belarus though.

State, writer, publication

A.B.: State-run publishing houses like Mastatskaja Literatura actually get subsidies from the government to publish Belarusian-language literature. It is only that your interests or your authors do not really converge.

I.L.: The state naturally "feeds" its "state ones." No country in the world – besides maybe China – runs state-owned publishing houses. It is very expensive and difficult. Why would the state need to subsidize book publishers? The state only needs to support national culture, so it creates national programs and foundations. For instance, despite the harshest economic crisis, Latvia has not cut a single government-funded program for the houses that publish Latvian-language books on literature and art. Presently, nearly all publishing houses in Latvia depend on grants and other forms of support. It makes no sense to compare this to Belarus, where cultural policy is based on the ideological divide, when the interests of the president, the government, or some corporations are the state's number one priority. Therefore, Belarus keeps the loss-making state-owned publishing houses, which execute government-guaranteed orders for literature that serves the interests of power. Those publishing houses may employ wonderful people and print good books, but it is absurd to have book-publishing organized in this way. To publish a book, one has to get ideological clearance: they see if the author is loyal, if he or she went to the square (*large-scale protests against the official results of the presidential elections in 2006 and 2010 – author's note*). That is, "friend" and "foe" identification overrides sense and national pride. Let's take the story of Vladimir Orlov as an example. Here is a contemporary

Belarusian writer of genius who can be comfortably called a national asset. Ten years ago, after yet another political or personal conflict, he was told that he would never be able to have his books published by any Belarusian state-owned publishing house. How do you take this? Of course, we publish his books. Let's take one more author, Ales' Ryazanov. He could easily get published by Mastatskaya Literatura. He doesn't want that, so he is linked to Logvinov. The emergence of two writers' unions became the culmination of this ideological divide. (*several years ago, the Union of Writers of Belarus split up into the opposition Union of Belarusian Writers and the pro-governmental Union of Writers of Belarus. – a uthor's note*).

A.B.: Nevertheless, the books published by your house are sold in state--owned bookstores.

I.L.: As a matter of fact, it's like a game: now it is sold, tomorrow it's not. The problem with our "black lists" is that, on one hand, the Lyapis Trubetskoy band has been removed from radio and TV broadcasts and cannot perform in Belarus. On the other hand, no official ban was actually issued. The same applies to books. A couple of years ago, Belkniga (*the largest state-owned bookstore network in Belarus – author's note*) was ordered not to sell books published by Logvinov. However, no official ban-supporting document could be found. Now that ban seems to be lifted, but some officials still remember it, and we have problems occasionally.

A.B.: On one hand, Belarusian literature fails to fit into the global literary context due to the "closedness" that you mentioned earlier. On the other hand, the literary industry is obviously non-existent. Authors cannot earn a living from books they spend years to write. Moreover, they have to finance their own books' publishing and take care of their distribution. Why, do you think, does this "literary Ghetto" still exist?

I.L.: There are many reasons for that. Firstly, the Belarusian-language literary market is in the process of formation, and it is expanding very slowly. The 2007 statistical data showed that only 7% of books were published in Belarusian. This was already a strong indicator. I don't think much has changed today. All depends on the consumption market capacity. The majority of

population reads in Russian. This is the second part of the problem. How can an author earn a living, if his works are not profitable, and his matter is of no public importance? In Lithuania or Latvia, for instance, writers wouldn't be able survive in market conditions, either. They live at the expense of the system of literary grants from the government, because, as I said earlier, the state is interested in keeping those writers alive and well. There are no such funding programs in Belarus. Our writers survive partly at the expense of European or American programs. When the Union of Writers of Belarus was being established, many joined, hoping to seize some opportunities. However, nothing has materialized. Government officials keep giving promises like: first, I tell you to write a certain novel and you write it, then I give you the money.

State, writer, publication

A.B.: So, let's say that the fundamental reason for this situation is the ideology that forms the basis of the cultural policy in Belarus? Culture does not work for *national* interests, choosing to serve the interests of state ideology.

I.L.: This has become especially obvious in the past ten years. The Belarusian-speaking opposition was always in confrontation with the official rule. Gradually, realizing the need for the *national*, the state began to enter their political turf. The problem of national identity was eventually raised on the state level, prompting various government-supported projects like "For Belarus!" However, the difference in goals has prevented such projects from getting to a common denominator. The importance of supporting the national culture is yet to be understood by the state, which continues to show no interest in promoting Belarusian-language literature. I have seen no real moves made by the state in support of Belarusian writers.

A.B.: However, you are saying that despite the existing problems, the Belarusian book market continues to grow.

I.L.: It happens mainly on account of the new generation of students for whom the Belarusian language is becoming the language of freedom. Still, in my view, it is too late for the emergence of national self-consciousness, because this problem no longer exists for the rest of the world. There are

problems that concern corporations, transnational colonies, but not some nations.

A.B.: In other words, in order to escape from this "ghetto," should the Belarusian literature leave aside the priority of the *national* and focus on the variety of genres, authors, and content?

I.L.: Yes, it should focus on the creation of meanings in the first place. Using national or ethnic trends in literature is difficult. It is much more productive to use semantic trends. At any rate, literature is about meaning, story-telling, and aesthetics. Besides intellectual fiction literature, there are crime stories, romance novels, and books for children. The language of writing is not so important. The main thing is that this literature is born from the Belarusian language, which creates very important opportunities. A representative example is Ales' Ryazanov, the author whose works form incredible poetry anthologies. In my view, he can be compared to Paul Celan. Ryazanov describes simple things with masterful detail and depth. He creates a special meaning, which I can't fully understand yet. This is born from the Belarusian language. The same may be done in prose as well.

A.B.: What books can you describe as the pride of your publishing house?

I.L.: A lot. I will not even name them not to make someone hurt if I forget to mention them. I think there are around fifty or more such books. They may not have paid off, but I am happy that it was us who published them.

A.B.: How does the Logvinov Publishing House manage to survive then, especially in the current harsh economic conditions?

I.L.: Despite having no money and no clear picture of the future, we continue to live happily and publish books. We have some more or less profitable projects. The books by Andrei Khadanovich and other writers of the new generation sell well. However, they account for only 5–10% of our operation. By and large, we are moving "by feel." For instance, we have been publishing Alhier Bacharevic since 2003. It was clear already at the beginning that he represented one of the most prospective phenomena




in Belarusian literature. Alhierd was very open-minded about European trends. Instead of pushing the national cause, he staked on human stories. Actually, Bacharevic wrote those stories. Yet, his project was not profitable for a long period of time. Only his latest novel *Saroka na šybenicy* started to sell well. We even paid him a honorarium. It was by 90% Alhierd's own success. True, we did support him, but we had no resources for large-scale promotion. As for our publishing house's book series, we are again testing waters. For instance, Gallery B, led by the writer and philosopher Igor Babkov, publishes the writings that may claim a significant place in literature. Their authors are: Valentin Akudovich, Igor Babkov, Anton Francishek Bryl', Oleg Minkin, Natalia Kharitaniuk and others. Logvinov is also a partner to the Nasha Niva Bookstore series. We publish some translation series: the Czech Collection under Sergei Smotrichenko, a Polish translation series that will soon become a separate collection. This year, we plan to launch the "Y" Bookstore series, in which we will republish the most significant books of Belarusian literature and culture over the past two hundred years. We will pay special attention to the literature of the '80–90s "renaissance" age. The series will be edited by the Belarusian philosopher Valentin Akudovich.

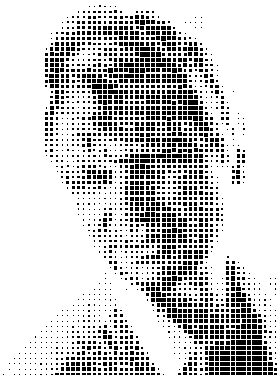
A.B.: So, is the passion for Belarusian literature still there?

I.L.: Absolutely. Still, we mostly stake on translated literature. As of today, it accounts for over 50% of our books, giving a true support both financially and meaningfully. Besides, it provides useful opportunities for the writers who do translations. For instance, when Bacharevic translated Wilhelm Gauf, he started creating his own meanings, getting dependent on the unique environment created by the German author. Actually, Gauf's translation was a very good project. Although not profitable, it was similar to my way of thinking.

A.B.: In your opinion, what are the prospects for Belarusian literature?

I.L.: I think one needs to wait for a new generation. Some are already emerging, like Natalia Kharitaniuk with her recent *13 istoriy pro miortvogo kota* (*the winner of the Maxim Bahdanovich Debut '2010 independent Belarusian award in Prose — author's note*). Vitali Ryzhkov's *Dzvery, zamknionyja na kliucy* (*the Debut '2010 award in Poetry. — author's note*) and Anton Francishak Bryl's translation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major* (*the winner of Debut '2010 award in Translation. — author's note*). That is, despite my personal fatigue, I think Belarusian literature has *a future*. Perhaps it will be different from what we imagine now. The young voices that continue to break through and sound persistently are a good sign, at least for me.

With no independent record label engaged in full-scale professional promotion of musical bands in present-day Belarus, independent bands continue to be “amateurish”, lacking the opportunity to make their living from music.



SHOW BUSINESS IN A COUNTRY THAT BANS APPLAUSE

LIAVON VOLSKI – INTERVIEW

The Belarusian musician, writer, and artist Liavon Volski has become a Belarusian real-life alternative art legend. Back in 1989, when *perestroika* was in full swing, Volski took part in the project called Mroya, which earned fame throught the USSR with its *Dvaccac' vos'maja zorka* album. Five years later, the members of Mroya formed a new band – N.R.M. (Niezaleznaya Respublika Mroya), which soon became a cult band, something significant for several generations. Volski participated in joint projects – *Narodny albom* and *Ja naradziusia tut*, which also became cult projects in Belarus, while *Gazeta Wyborcza* named *Narodny Albom* Poland's main event in 1997. After N.R.M., Liavon Volski performed with Krambambulia and Zet and recorded an album called *Belaja jablynia hromu*, based on the lyrics of Belarusian classic poets. Sauka dy Hryshka political satire project is one of the musician's recent initiatives.

Stasia Ruseckaja: Liavon, you are one of those cultural figures in this country who are also engaged in active performances, giving several concerts across Belarus and a tour in Germany in recent months.

Liavon Volski: I wouldn't call it active. Rather, this is an exception due to the launch of Sauka dy Hryshka project. Routinely, I may not play a single gig for several months. Unfortunately, this is a common thing for Belarus.

S.R.: Still, set against the schedule of other Belarusian musicians, this may be called busy artistic activity. Anyway, besides that, you openly declare your political stance. Art and politics are said to be incompatible. They say an active social and political life may negatively affect the process of artistic creation.

L.V.: I think an artist is free to choose whether to have a political position or not. I don't really differentiate between them; I don't even think about it. I can express something socially or politically sensitive both in my songs and during concerts. Sauka dy Hryshka is a bright example. This project may not seem to be serious, yet my characters speak openly about everything. I am only a medium who notes what they say. Generally, I think that an artist without a political position looks somewhat awkwardly in present-day Belarus. Well, one can say, for instance, in Germany: "I am not into politics, and I am not interested in Bundestag affairs." However, nowadays in Belarus it is simply impossible to exist without a political position. For instance, one has no political position but wears dreadlocks; there is very high probability that this person may be detained near some street protest. So, it's better to have some political stance. I may be wrong, but this is how it all looks to me personally.

S.R.: Don't you feel it somehow affects the artistic value of your texts?

L.V.: In fact, I was told before, even in the '80s, that my texts were short-lived. But it has turned out that you can pick any of my old songs and it will sound topical today. Actually, I'd be very happy if all those "short-lived" texts were relegated to oblivion and kept in some Belarusian music collection. Sadly, it is quite the opposite.

S.R.: How was the idea of your latest project Sauka dy Hryshka born?

L.V.: The songs for this project were written for a foreign radio station. But even earlier I had fancied two characters who could voice absolutely opposite opinions like it happens here in Belarus. Imagine two buddies who lived in the same village, went to the same school. Then, one of them became a policeman; the other one ended up in the opposition. That's how Sauka and Hryshka emerged. In fact, their names originate from a traditional Belarusian folk song.

S.R.: This "divide" between people is very topical in Belarusian situation...

L.V.: I'd say it is way too topical. Here is an example, a true story. One popular singer goes to the same sauna the current director of a Belarusian TV channel used to visit as well before becoming a director. That official stopped sharing the sauna with this popular Belarusian singer because the latter is associated with the opposition. So, the "plot" of Sauka dy Hryshka is very real. For instance, what is the simplest way for a man from the town of Slonim to get registered in the capital? Obviously, he should enroll in the Police Academy to get benefits, salary, and housing. And the one who writes poetry usually stays behind in Slonim. This is a typical Belarusian situation.

S.R.: Did you go for a tour in Germany with Sauka dy Hryshka?

L.V.: No, I went with Krambambulia, which is very topical abroad. Moreover, Krambambulia has songs in foreign languages.

S.R.: How is a Belarusian band received abroad? Do they know Belarus? Do they know what is going on there?

L. V.: In Berlin, they naturally know more, because it is a multi-national city. We also played in Hamburg, and it is a bit different. But, actually, despite being a small nation, Belarus is relatively well covered by the foreign press and on the Interent. They write a lot about us. It's no wonder given the things happening in the country.

S.R.: You were *gently* reproached in one interview that social topics were no longer present in your art…

L.V.: Possibly, this happened after my *Belaja jablynia hromu* album. Yes, it was lyrical, but I also needed that period in order to do some "arts and crafts" like *Belaja jablynia…* and *Kupliety i prypievy* before moving on to more serious solo performances. As I said earlier, social topics don't disappear; this is my base. I touched on them while in N.R.M. and will keep doing that.

S.R.: The year 1981 was a reference point for your artistic career, since you teamed up with Uladzimir Davydouski and Aleh Dzemidovich to form the band Favaryt…

L.V.: I was 15, and it was barely anything serious. We were just learning how to play.

S.R.: Still, you picked up the guitar and began composing. What were the subsequent stages of your musical "history"?

L.V.: Our true reference point was in 1984 when Mroya took part in the Performing Arts Week where we played a rock gig in the Belarusian language. It became clear to everyone that Belarusian-language rock music emerged. Of course, we lacked skills and were rather an amateurish band. However, it's noteworthy that we had timely topical lyrics and music. Right after that we were enlisted in the army. In 1986, we were in a spell of "rehabilitation" from the army, trying to get used to the new realities of *perestroika*. Then, the period of the first real popularity came. In late '80s – early '90s our tunes were played all around, music videos were shot. We finished in the first position in a hit parade with our song *Jon jasce viernieсca*. We were besotted by success. Even so, it did not pan out money-wise. It was a paradox of the Soviet or post-Soviet society: you are popular, people ask for your autograph in the street, they line up in queues for your concerts. Yet you don't have money. On the contrary, you have to be your own investor.

Success was followed by stagnation. Belarus gained independence, and there was nothing left to fight for. Mroya was the band with fighting spirit. We would not be ourselves playing some universal topics. In terms of artistic



creation, it was a totally fruitless period. Still, we continued to rehearse and think what to do next. The situation required some solution, and it did get sorted out with the arrival of president Lukashenko. The conditions, both inside the band and externally, got "conducive" again. This is how N.R.M. band emerged to achieve the level of success that nobody else in Belarus had ever reached. Besides, I wrote some poetry and prose, did paintings, drew comic books. One comics (some fifty pages) nearly got published, but it got misplaced somewhere in editorial offices while the company was moving out. I also drew sketches for the *Biarozka* magazine. Somehow, comics art did not become popular in Belarus.

A politicized band, Zet, (*…a mysterious band of musicians who always hide their faces behind masks and disguise themselves under nicknames – author's note*) was formed in 2000. Our role models were protesting and uncompromising foreign rockers who were not interested in profit, mainstream, and the price of tickets. The band eventually "disappeared" having released two albums. We didn't want establishment, no wonder it was not there.

Then, Krambambulia emerged. This was a step aside from rock music. We decided to take a break from serious topics; we felt like entertaining the public. At that time, local pop music was in bad condition. Once I was doing a lecture on pop culture and show business in one university and asked students what popular Belarusian musicians they were aware of. Fifteen people named only three artists, despite our pop "stars" appearing on TV everyday. Then I asked if they knew any songs. Nobody could recall anything. Those were not youngsters; those were the representatives of middle class, businessmen who enrolled to upgrade their skills. Only one woman eventually recalled Afanasieva, who once performed at their corporative party. So, Krambambulia stepped on the territory of Belarusian pop culture. Music and lyrics were deliberately soft-headed. However, surprisingly, the song *Gosci* entered every house in Belarus. Back then, it was slightly easier

to take off, since cooperation with Belarusian television was somewhat possible, and, unlike today, they did not have such "terrible" shows which would make one feel ashamed for just being placed next to them in the program schedule. Anyway, we found our niche; even customs officials knew our *Gosci*.

S.R.: I recall a story about a police cadet, starting to sing N.R.M.'s *Try Charapakhi* at some amateur performance.

L.V.: I have heard about it too. Actually, it comes out that they often play *Try Charapakhi* at disco parties in the Police Academy. Once a law-enforcement official sang along at our gig in a club. The man later said in an interview that he grew up listening to those songs… Who am I bringing up? I really don't know… Eventually, Krambambulia got banned. As I said earlier, we had entered the wrong turf and various showbiz "big shots" could not forgive us. Nowadays, Krambambulia is on the "black list." (*after the December 2010 presidential election, the authorities drew up an unofficial list of cultural figures and musical bands, banned from performing their concerts in Belarus – author's note*).

S.R.: Something must be wrong here: you can tour in Belarus, but Krambambulia cannot?

L.V.: Well, my name is not on the "list." You know, there may be a woman in some district community center who, by and large, approves of Belarusian music and has a good personal attitude to me or Zmitsier Vaitsiushkevich. If allowed, she would organize every concert. But then, there is this "list." So, our agent calls her: "Can we stage *Belaja jablynia hromu* performance by Volski?" She says: "Surely, yes!" Agent: "What about the 'list?'" She says: "Wait, his name is not on the list. So let's go ahead with the concert." It is definitely more difficult for Vaitsiushkevich because his name is on the "list."

S.R.: You started back in Soviet times. Did you feel freer then or now?

Show business in a country that bans applause

L.V.: Obviously, there was pressure in late '80s. However, changes were already taking place. There were people even in komsomol who promoted us. At the same time, some executive committees wanted badly to ban our lyrics. We even had to ask the Union of Writers to provide us with a certificate proving that our texts were okay – thankfully, my dad gave us a helping hand (*Liavon's father Artur Volski was a Belarusian renowned writer – author's note*). Still, we were banned. So, once Vital Siamashka and Yury Tsybin helped our band to appear at the Navapolatsk Festival '89 where we received an award. That prize automatically sealed the official approval of our texts. Afterwards, we began touring actively across Belarus. In Drahichyn or Bykhau, we would often play a concert with support from some district komsomol committee. This was possible because, firstly, they had to show some activities for the youth in their reports. Secondly, they liked rock music. Therefore, I can't really say that we were under big pressure back then. At any rate, police officers would never come to shut down our concert. This thing happened to N.R.M. There is more pressure now. For some unknown reason, authorities perceive our art as pure politics. Recently, I tried to reflect on my so-called artistic career. We began under pressure, then we were pressed during *perestroika*, and we are banned again now. As a popular song says, that's how my best years have passed. Another saying goes: "Heaven forbid you live in the times of change." What can we do? We just live... I come to Berlin, for instance, where one feels quiet and resting, finds peace of mind. Then, I read about what's going on in Belarus and I tell myself: "Why should I come back?" Yet, I have to and I do come back.

S.R.: This "situation" can be interpreted as "conducive" for artistic creation, since the fighting spirit remains.

L.V.: The kind of art we perform requires, among other things, favorable financial conditions. A pure idea is, of course, a good thing. But, an artist needs to buy paint and canvas, while musicians need quality instruments and should be able to rent a studio. I can't implement all my intended projects because it is very expensive. Some foundations help, but they do it seldom. Their focus is mainly on political and social projects. Since we can sell tickets to our concerts, they treat us as show business.

S.R.: Talking about the general situation in Belarusian musical space, what is happening there? How does our show biz operate, if it exists, of course?

L.V.: Forgive me for my "humor," but how on earth can we seriously talk about show business in the country where clapping is banned and only the flags of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) should be waved instead? (*Recent protests in Belarus took the form of silent actions, with people gathering in squares and clapping. People were ruthlessly detained by the police for clapping – author's note*). Jokes aside, there is a grain of truth here. As of today, there is no independent record label in this country that would be engaged in full-scale professional promotion of musical bands. There is only one "record label" – the state itself. The government has built dozens of studios, invested a lot of money and is now looking for young talents in order to organize For Belarus! propaganda concerts. There are some producers who somehow find those talents and try to spin them off. However, everything managed by our government usually turns out to be of low quality, except for, maybe, a decent army. Popular music should not be treated like sports. Obviously, show business means money, and the state does have money. A businessman who sponsors his son's endeavors also has money. In this regard, independent bands are somewhat amateurish, because they have no opportunity to make a living from music.

S.R.: Does it mean that the whole Belarusian alternative music is amateur?

L.V.: Yes, it is "spontaneous." DIY, so to say.

S.R.: Why is this happening? Can't the government see the potential benefits?

L.V.: Our authorities have a specific "taste" and passions; for instance, they like television, pop culture, and parades. Those are very well attended spheres, where the money is invested, where some artists are "nurtured." But they treat them like sports. That's why, I think, there is a quality failure. A "star" should be free. American pop stars, for instance, could freely express their protest against the aggression on Iraq. This can hardly be imagined in Belarus. On the other hand, it is understandable: there is no show business,

because it is state-owned. Still, there is a very interesting scheme utilized by the so-called "state producers." For instance, a producer of a female singer comes to a factory and tells the administration that the concert's turnout should be at least 60%. When asked why, he says that they have performed before at a For Belarus! concert, so they have proper music and patriotic songs. That's how full house is gathered. Nowadays, this scheme is hardly efficient due to the crisis, as people cut on their spending.

S.R.: How do you organize your own concerts?

L.V.: If we were not banned, we would have managed to operate well, even in these unproductive financial conditions. Belarusian legislation has become more liberal now that they abolished touring certificates. One needs to pick a date, call the venue administration, rent the equipment and, eventually, run a surplus. That would be a very narrow margin, yet you are in the black. Obviously, this is not the way a tour should be organized. Instead of two concerts a year, one has to tour around, dropping, for instance, in Ivianets, Rakau, or Valozhyn. But it is impossible to make any profit there, because these are small towns; you can't put a high price tag on tickets, yet you have to rent the venue and cover running costs.

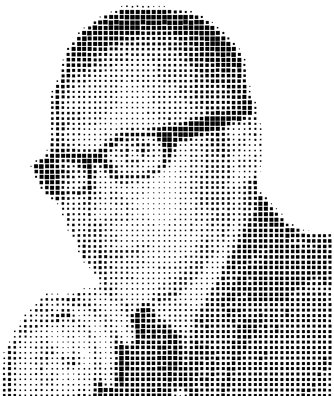
S.R.: **Still, despite all odds, you remain positive. I think you are the only artist who took all these "lists" with humor.**

L.V.: Becase I am sick and tired of being frustrated over all these "black lists." I felt bad when it happened for the first time. When they ban you, you feel bitter, as if nothing will ever come up again. I had a breakdown, I won't lie. It hardened me in a way. I'm not afraid anymore, since they can't ban everything anyway. How can the Internet be banned, for example? Even police cadets would be outraged. So, I look into the future with optimistic eyes. Moreover, everything that is taking place now is so absurd that the crisis of the government, economy, and society in general is evident. People are imprisoned for nothing, yet they keep getting out in the streets. This never happened before. But, the crisis is good, because it is a sign of healing, even if it is not as fast as one could wish.

S.R.: N.R.M. used to be not only a cult band. It emerged as a certain idea, a manifesto of the day. Would you ever wish to get back to this idea?

L.V.: I think this idea of a virtual country where everyone is free and can talk about anything will definitely arise. Sad to say, for several reasons, we didn't manage to bring that concept to a close. Still, in my view, it should not be abandoned. Perhaps we will give it "second birth" online. I have some ideas, but I will not voice all of them, since if one says a good thing it might not happen. It may turn up a significant development not just for me.

Belarusian independent music projects get prizes, are well received in Russia and Western Europe, but have to survive in clandestine conditions at home.



I SHALL MAKE A STORM

EVGENY KOLMYKOV – INTERVIEW

The punk rock band Lyapis Trubetskoy is one of the most successful alternative music projects in Belarus and has a unique experience. In addition to success at home, Lyapis Trubetskoy holds top positions in alternative charts in Russia and Ukraine. In more and more countries, audience gets interested in their songs: the band had successful concerts in the USA, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Lithuania. Evgeny Kolmykov, the band's producer and the director of the Deti Solntsa artistic group answered our questions about the reasons for such popularity.

Stasia Rusetskaya: Evgeny, you have had over twenty years of producing experience. You were at the dawn of a new Belarusian music culture; one can say that you were among its founding fathers.

Evgeny Kolmykov: I learned I was a producer much later than when I actually became one. I just ran across some article, an interview with a producer of some musical who was talking about his experience. Then I thought: "Hey! I am doing the same thing!" Yet, there is something in the work of a producer

that I cannot associate myself with. Producers put profit first. By my nature and values, I am not a businessman. I prefer to uncover natural talents of a person, an artist... I don't intervene or set up special projects. I'd rather water their talents as one waters flowers. Judging from the results, which include numerous prizes for our music videos and the repeated recognition of Lyapis Trubetskoy as Russia's best rock band, such a *non-monetary* strategy does work. So, I am not a producer in the true meaning of the word. I prefer introducing myself as an art director of the Deti Solntsa artistic group.

S.R.: It sounds really Soviet-style.

E.K.: It may sound Soviet, but it shows the true essence.

S.R.: How did it start? I know that you'd already had some experience of, shall we say, "entertainment" business before the Lyapis Trubetskoy project.

E.K.: I started with theater. I did my mass celebration director studies at the Institute of Culture. Besides, I worked in the student theater of the Medical Institute. When the Soviet Union collapsed, I was already a family man, and I had no means of subsistence. Then, I came upon an encyclopedia of European cultures which told me about Belgian associations, English clubs, Dutch theaters, all of them trying to lure the public into pubs. I went really enthusiastic about it and decided to organize something like that in Minsk. I thought: "Let's start with an English club." So, the Tractor Plant's Palace of Culture agreed to lend their premises to stage the first Belarusian "private" shows for the emerging class of businessmen. We created the Bambuki theater specially for those shows; acting were hungry students from the Arts Academy and the Institute of Culture. This was a male theater; female roles were played by men. Sergey Mikhalok and artist Aleksey Khatskevich were scriptwriters. I was the director, and Lyapis Trubetskoy served as accompaniment to Bambuki plays. This is how it all started.

S.R.: Since you underline your role in the Deti Solntsa artistic group, tell us more about this group and its history.

E.K.: We started in Soviet times. This implies that from the very beginning we had a huge protest potential in everything we did. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, prompting a fast development of businesses, "entertainment" included. At first, we were taken aback: what could we do now? Then we realized that we had to unite and support each other. This developed into the Deti Solntsa concept which follows the principle of developing natural talents. Actors, musicians and artists joined our union. We produced joint projects, shot our own music videos, and prepared shows. We had our own symbols. During private shows, we made fires and awarded medals. We invited friends from Russia and Ukraine who would also become the Children of the Sun. We opened branches in Kiev, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Then, we started feeling bad about not helping young and talented people. Hence, Deti Solntsa decided to support other projects, such as Serebryanaya Svadba and Bez Bileta. Nowadays, our movement is not so active as, let's say, five years ago, but it still exists.

S.R.: Do I get you right in your statement that your work with other projects such as Mary Poppins and TT-34 bands, Sasha i Sirozha project of Aleksey Khatskevich and Sergey Mikhalok was simply to help your friends?

E.K.: It went different ways. The bands that we took in hand were very *individual*. It was difficult to build long-term relations with any of them. We knew Ben'ka and Artiom (*the leaders of Serebryanaya Svadba – author's note*) for a long time. When they suddenly "shot out," I started supporting them and hired a manager. At that time Sasha Bogdanov was their agent (*now the director of Bo Promo, a Minsk-based concert agency and label – author's note*). Yet, when at times we discussed some organizational matters, the solution could not be reached because of just one band member. We had to coordinate every little step with every member of the band. If you discuss your steps with everyone, someone will always object. I think this is a bright example of the peculiarity of Belarusian mentality when a band has real difficulties in deciding about leadership.

S.R.: Do you think that such a light-minded approach to work is met only among Belarusians?

E.K.: I don't know. Probably other countries with little experience of work in the field of entertainment face the same challenge. But, let's take Germany, Great Britain, the United States. The culture of professional relations between musicians, producers, and organizers developed there for decades. Belarusians used to live on remote islands in the marshes or in roadside dugouts. Hence, they lack experience in professional relations. But, frankly speaking, I like it, since this gives us a chance to start everything from scratch, not following some textbooks. Life is our teacher.

S.R.: Your rich producing experience includes knowledge about how such things work in other countries. What are the peculiarities of Belarusian "entertainment" business?

E.K.: We have our advantages and disadvantages. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarusian alternative musicians actively moved to play in Europe. Minsk is a very convenient city: Kiev, Moscow, Vilnius, Berlin, Warsaw, and other European capitals are just a one-night car drive away. Those who wanted to appear on TV screen or on magazine covers were, naturally, looking at Moscow. Belarus became a very convenient place for those who wanted to "try out" their project before moving abroad. Belarusian musicians have a luxurious opportunity to sit in their "cellars" for several years, developing their musical styles. Musicians in Moscow cannot afford sitting and rehearsing something in the same rehearsal studio for years. This is too expensive. So, a band in Belarus can easily make a good concert show, try it inside the country and then, after it gets some publicity, bring it to Moscow. There is some interest in Belarusian culture in Moscow, and this is another advantage for our musicians. Russians know that something interesting always pops up in Belarus, such as Serebyannaya Svadba, Kassiopeya, Petlya Pristrastiya, or Troitsa.

S.R.: So, what are the disadvantages?

E.K.: First of all, a closed environment. Belarusians have a very low level of interpersonal contacts. Recently, Belarusian independent culture activists gathered in Germany. We looked at each other, realizing that we did not know a thing about each other; of course, we heard something, but we could not even imagine who was doing what.

S.R.: In your view, a project can "mature" in Belarus. But when it is ripe, it should be promoted. Musicians, naturally, don't know a thing about promotion.

E.K.: The cobbler should stick to his last. We don't have this culture yet. There are several reasons for that. One of them, in my view, is the size of population. Of course, Lithuania is even smaller. So, if some Lithuanian singer decides to make a video clip, she records it in Lithuanian, English, and Russian. But this approach is not a real alternative. We cannot rely on the domestic market. We can play five, six gigs a year. What next? German, Polish, Russian bands can work professionally, planning their tour schedule for the whole year ahead. Belarusians have low salaries and a different concert culture, so one cannot plan in the same way in Belarus. The second reason is the one I mentioned earlier: no one taught us anything. Add this to the low level of communication and you will see that even very talented musicians will have troubles to *survive* in these conditions.

S.R.: Alternative music is your prime interest. Still, how would you describe the overall situation in Belarusian music environment? Is any systematic work done in this field?

E.K.: There are singers and bands who make records and advertise themselves. People come to their concerts. There is a system that seems to work. But, if we take the experience of other countries like Sweden, a nation of four to five million which five years ago was the third exporter of rock music in the world, it seems that our system works in some *other way*. In Sweden, if one has a project in the head, he or she turns for support not only to business community, but to the state as well. The project is then evaluated, and if it is any good, the state starts to support it. For instance, the renowned Swedish Export Music is a semi-governmental organization. We don't have such institutions at all. Independent agencies and state organizations (which follow state orders) walk in different directions and have little or no interaction.

S.R.: In your opinion, what is the reason for the *vitality* and creativity of Lyapis Trubetskoy? It is not a usual thing for a project with more than a 20-year-old history.

E.K.: Having a common goal or idea makes it easier to work and live in general. Any project gets a second wind when different people can join efforts in order to support, not to press each other; when discipline comes naturally without enforcement. Of course, we have some techniques of project survival, for example, when a new person joins the band. Yet, it boils down to the idea anyway. Lyapis Trubetskoy survives due to its clear ideological concept. In my opinion, a crisis of ideas is approaching. When there are too many "prophets," one wants to stifle them. When they are few… That's what we lack now! This is not just a Belarusian problem; this is a European problem. There is no unifying idea that would lead people to some goal.

S.R.: Don't we have a *wonderful* situation in Belarus in this context? We have an idea; we know what we should fight against…

E.K.: Yeah, we have just a *wonderful* situation in Belarus… in this context.

S.R.: Lyapis Trubetskoy is an example of how the consciousness of Belarusian society has developed. They started playing backstage in the Bambuki theater and later moved into the territory of light and ironic protest music. Their recent albums seem to reflect the position of adults with a clear civic position.

E.K.: When society is under pressure, it is easier for talented people to express themselves. The USSR was a vivid example. Just imagine how many talented people lived in Stalin's era. Can you name me persons of such scale in modern Russia? Where is their new Meyerhold, new Bulgakov? In conditions of pressure, a new form of allegory is born: one wants to talk, since there are topics to discuss. So, one will be singing "Hedgehogs got some mushrooms, hares got some carrots…," and everyone will be thinking "What did he want to say? He probably called that person a hedgehog, and the other one a hare…," etc. In this context Belarus has just a great potential.

S.R.: Do you link the popularity of Lyapis Trubetskoy to the origin of the band, since everyone knows that it comes from the country with such a special political situation?





E.K.: I link the band's popularity to the talent of Mikhalok, his laboriousness and internal state. I think that talented people are in some way "mutants." The next question is what one would do with his or her internal state. Some can fly away quite quickly, like Curt Cobain. Others learn self-control. Our lifespan is not ten, but, in theory, seventy – eighty years, so we need to "prolong" our flight. How? Probably by limiting oneself, learning self--management techniques. Mikhalok is really into sports. In Minsk and on tours, when he has some free time, he really runs a lot: he needs to spend his energy somehow! A successful project is based on a personality as well. There could be ten talented people, but without such a "mutant" the project would not be successful.

Another possible reason for the band's popularity is the ideological and emotional message delivered by Lyapis Trubetskoy. When we visited Germany, I suddenly noticed one phenomenon. There was a band playing before us, singing some Russian rock songs. Their music, their sound was of lower quality compared to European bands. But Germans sang along with greater enthusiasm. I saw the same thing in Warsaw. It seems that European audience lacks something that it finds in our songs. Those Russian songs probably have some spirituality that Europe is lacking. And Europeans feel somehow nostalgic. You can see this "crisis of ideas" in Europe. They have no bright personalities who would carry a clear message. Maybe the reason for that is their good life, while we bring the impulse of melancholy that is Europe lacks. This is, of course, my subjective observation.

S.R.: Recently, after the presidential election in Belarus, Lyapis Trubetskoy openly supported the appeal to free political prisoners and landed on the list of bands that cannot perform in Belarus. In one of your interviews, you told the journalist that you could divide the history of the band

into "before" and "after" stage. Did this list really play such a significant role for you?

E.K.: We have always tried to be "outside of politics" because, to put it mildly, we do not like any politicians. But after those events we automatically landed on the other side of the barricade. They have put a limit to the most important thing for us: we cannot play concerts at home. Of course, we feel stung, and our fans are hurt.

S.R.: For how long, in your view, will all this continue?

E.K.: We can't know our future. Everything is very unstable in Belarus nowadays. I will be not surprised if in autumn some promoter with "connections" will get a deal with the Department of Culture to get the necessary permit and will snatch a large sum.

S.R.: What surprises you as a music connoisseur? What do you expect when you go to the concert of a new band or listen to a new album?

E.K.: It's difficult to say… I think we are living in the state of protracted pause. Eleven years of the third millennium have passed, yet we don't have any new "prophets." I think this will change. Something should happen. It will be either a revolutionary or evolutionary "leap." And this new "prophet" will reveal himself through the music; he will tell us through his songs whether this is revolution or evolution. Creative people are like barometers. They detect information prior to others. These are not just my personal thoughts. If one analyzes the emergence of new movements, one will see that they appear at the same moment, independent of each other, in different places. So, if you witness the lull, expect the storm.

S.R.: Do you wait for the storm?

E.K.: I rather try to make this "storm" happen. Why wait?

While cinematography all over the world chooses other ways, the National Film Studio Belarusfilm sticks to old Soviet patterns that are clearly outdated in the modern, changed world.



SHOOT A GOOD FILM

ANDREY KUDINENKO – INTERVIEW

The film director Andrei Kudinenko is one of the last students of the legendary Belarusian film director Viktor Turov and the author of the widely acclaimed *Okkupatsiya. Misterii*. Released in 2004, the movie received a warm welcome at European film festivals to be banned shortly afterwards in Belarus for its interpretation of the World War II partisan movement. According to the Belarusian authorities, the movie "contradicted the very truth, could hurt the feelings of war veterans and negatively influence the education of young generations." After that, Kudinenko left for Moscow where he directed the TV series *Kadetstvo* and film *Rozygrysh*. Both projects raised good Russian box office revenues. In 2009, Andrei was officially invited to Belarusfilm, where he produced *Masakra*, which became the first Belarusian *bulba-horror* (Kudinenko's self-invented genre). Independent critics link the future of the national cinema with Kudinenko's persona. As they note, despite being a controversial figure, Kudinenko has managed to turn a new page in the history of Belarusian cinema.

Stasia Rusetskaya: Andrey, how did you start making movies?

Andrey Kudinenko: Filmmaking was my dream. I think everyone dreams to shoot a film. When I was a kid, I seriously went into football and wanted to become a professional footballer. But then our cinemas started screening some strange (in my opinion) films, and I was amazed by the existence of some *other* culture. I really liked the films about underground movements of World War II. I imagined the world of cinema as something unattainable; therefore, I wanted to enter it. Nowadays, everything is so affordable. One can pick up a video or photo camera and shoot a film. I really like young guys who try to create something. I try to support and promote them. What surprises me is that with all technical tools being so accessible, young people don't seem to be too active in filming. To shoot *Okkupatsiya,* I used $1000 that I earned as my first honorarium for making some promotional video. After that film, Emir Kusturica invited me for dinner. For many foreign cinema fans, the movie became a "sacred cow." It was all about some "commoners" getting together and deciding to shoot a film. And we just did it. I want to return to the roots in my next film. Everyone is so mercantile: they want to gain profit, to make use of the budget. To me, it is stupid and boring. I have now managed to put together a good team of professionals who share my desire that you either make a good film or retire. I think this is the most important message today, since not everything is measured by money. Money in cinema is a philosophical term, a metaphor.

S.R.: True, it is technically easier to shoot a film nowadays. But, don't you think that getting proper education is also important? You were a student of one of the biggest figures in Belarusian cinema.

A.K.: Education is certainly important. But look: who is teaching at the Belarusian Academy of Arts nowadays? When we studied there, still in Soviet times, there were masters. So, the students were more responsible. Turov did not really teach us anything. He would just come to classes and watch, for instance, my piece from *Besy* by Dostoevski. And then he would tell us: "Love each other, folks." That was the highest possible award for me. I consider Turov the best film director in Belarus. His *Ya rodom iz detstva* is a brilliant movie. Turov was capable of bringing the best of the best, such

as the script writer Gennady Shpalikov, cameraman Aleksander Kniazhyski or singer and actor Vladimir Vysotski, to his films. This skill, too, is part of director's mastery. Alas, the time of serious film schools is over. The famous VGIK (the All-Russian State University of Cinematography) in Moscow has turned into a commercial entity. At the same time, it is obvious that cinema cannot be taught, just like no one can teach to write poems. The world knows examples of self-taught film geniuses.

S.R.: With the death of Mikhail Ptashuk in 2002, the film school in Belarus virtually disappeared. There are new students, but there is no one to teach them. So, young people move to Russia or Europe to learn filmmaking and rarely come back. What is the reason for such a "gap" between the old and the new generations of Belarusian film directors?

A.K.: How can we talk about the phenomenon of "Belarusian cinematography" if it never existed? I mean the real, national cinema. *Vostochnyi koridor* by Valentin Vinogradov was the first real movie that was completed in Belarusfilm studios. However, Vinogradov was not born in Belarus. After World War II, the studio director actively head-hunted for professionals across the Soviet Union, trying to offer them comfortable working conditions. Therefore, at that moment, Belarusfilm managed to gather really serious and talented people, but this was not our national cinema.

S.R.: What about your *Okkupatsiya*?

A.K.: That was the first genuine Belarusian movie. By the way, it was filmed "against all odds." Mikhail Ptashuk had just started working on his *V avguste 44go* which was to consume the studio's two-year budget. Me and the scriptwriter Alexander Kachan realized that we should shoot something *different* and low-budget. I had just received my honorarium for a promo video, so we started shooting. Actors were paid $10. We got some equipment free. This is what "against all odds" means in this case.

S.R.: Did you have the *idea* of the film from the very beginning?

A.K.: At first, it was just a joke. Then, we decided that we needed to make a serious statement. The first story *Adam i Eva,* premiered at the House of Cinema, stirred enough fan and media frenzy for us to carry on. Eventually, several stories were united into *Okkupatsiya. Misterii*.

S.R.: Some time later, your movie was banned in Belarus…

A.K.: Yep. War veterans came to one of our screenings and were outraged. Then we got the official papers, informing us that the movie was banned…

S.R.: So, you left for Moscow?

A.K.: What could I do? I had an employment ban in Belarus. I had no money. So, I went to Moscow and filmed TV shows. When I was filming *Kadetstvo,* the Russian film director Pavel Lungin invited me for lunch and suggested filming anything I wanted. It appeared he was amazed by *Okkupatsiya*. I wanted to make something for youngsters, as I realized I should not confine myself to one topic only. After *Okkupatsiya,* I continued to receive invitations to make war movies. I declined them all, because I had already expressed myself completely and had nothing new to say on this topic.

S.R.: In 2009, you got a proposal from Belarusfilm. How did you react to that?

A.K.: Calmly. The crisis was unfolding in Russia, so I lost many projects. Still, I didn't want to accept their invitation. So, to scare them away, I wrote that I wanted to film only horrors. I thought that they would not agree, but instead, they gathered an editorial board and decided: "Go ahead."

S.R.: Why didn't you feel like going to Belarus?

A.K.: I was well aware of what to expect from a government-funded film-making. The saying that it is impossible to shoot a good movie at Belarusfilm belongs to me. In my view, this is a film studio of missed opportunities. It had only two really good films: *Vostochnyi koridor* by Vinogradov and *Dikaya okhota Korolia Stakha* by Valeri Rubinchik. Those films should have given

the beginning to the national genre, thus bringing Belarusian cinematography to the European level. Although there were some good films, both on war and about children, Belarusian cinematography never became part of European culture.

Masakra was planned as a European-format film about a Belarusian Dracula. However, I had unrealistic expectations about the situation at our film studios. At first, I thought that I would still be able to work in those conditions. Soon I realized that it was hardly possible. I wasted two years of my life working on that film. At every stage of our work, I had to prove something to somebody, arguing with people who often had nothing to do with cinematography. I recall a woman from some department of planning asking why we needed to go to Grushevka in Baranovichi district. My argument that we wanted to film an 18th century chapel would not impress her. We encountered the same problems with our script: it appeared, we could not touch Catholics or Georgians… For two months, my mornings started with quarrels. I honestly tried to make a film. This film can be praised or criticized, but I know for sure that unless profound changes take place, no good movies can be made in Belarus.

S.R.: So, does the problem go deeper than just the miserable funding of government-guaranteed films?

A.K.: The problem is peoples' cowardice. The director of the film studio tells you that you can do whatever you want. Right after that, he starts writing some directives. I had to accept compromises, because I think that the history of cinematography in general is based on compromise. Those who say that they do not make compromises stretch the truth. However, I made it clear from the very beginning that I would not accept lower standards in visual presentation of the film. It was my principal position. If we shoot on Kodak, give us Kodak. I was telling the bosses: "The king is naked!," meaning that the picture was of bad quality. They tried to convince me otherwise. The situation was even more of a nonsense, because the studio had just bought Bestlite equipment, better than at Mosfilm. But nobody knew how to operate it. We had to bring some people from Moscow to show how to work on that equipment. After two days, Belarusians learned how to use it. I applauded: yes, you can! Everyone was happy.

Or let's take the sound. My sound editor Volkov came up and told me they could not record Dolby Surround in a small room and needed a bigger hall. The hall was given to some orchestra. Silly and petty-minded people! They do not understand that it is impossible to make a good movie without investments and efficiency. The most horrible thing is that you are totally dependent on such people.

One thing that surprised me at the very beginning was their attitude to foreign partnership. Before I started making the film, I flied to Warsaw several times in search for partners for co-production. However, I was told by Belarusfilm that they did not need those partners. Why would they need to think about the future of the film, indeed? They get the funding, draw it, and their life is good. Why would they need some European market? "Poles? Which Poles? Let's shoot it on our own!" they told me, so I started filming, realizing that it was impossible to break away. The system is following the old Soviet pattern where financial reporting was product-based. The difference is, however, that in the Soviet Union, there was a well-developed box office. The film immediately reached movie theaters across the country as soon as it was made and released. In Belarus, after producers or directors "report" on their film, usually it is put on the shelf where it "dies."

S.R.: Being aware of that, you still agreed to direct a new film at Belarusfilm. The shooting of *Shlakhtich Zavalnya* based on Barshchevski's book was planned for this year.

A.K.: That's true. They immediately offered me to make one more film. Artur Klinov, the script-writer, suggested a very interesting twist of the plot. The film studio itself urged me to start the project, since they needed to balance the quarter. Then, the expert council gathered to discuss the script… You know, we still have expert and artistic councils… So, after the meeting, they brought in a verdict: the filming was impossible. It appeared that the issue of terrorism was irrelevant to Belarus and, moreover, a Belarusian would never be able to kill a Russian. Some crazier stuff happened, and the film was shut down.

S.R.: Are there any artistic councils in Russia?

A.K.: Yes, there are. But, their members are not some old women or occasional people. The council comprises of my producer, the director of photography and myself. We sit down to discuss something on equal terms. We can argue, disagree with each other, but still, we are all interested in the best possible result.

S.R.: So, do I get you right in that Belarusian cinematography today, on the one hand, suffers from the lack of tradition, and on the other, from the underdeveloped industry?

A.K.: By and large, there is no cinema industry in Belarus. Cinematography all over the world has its own ways, while Belarusfilm follows old Soviet patterns that are clearly outdated in the modern, changed world.

S.R.: The Belarusfilm situation is easy to understand since this is a state-owned entity. What prevents the emergence of alternative cinema in Belarus?

A.K.: Two things. This one really confuses me – with all those technical tools being so accessible, why are young people not making films? Alternative cinema is made by people. Where are the geniuses? The world is too mercantile. Everyone thinks about publicity, about profits, and no one thinks about filmmaking. Secondly, the state should announce tenders and be interested in film promotion.

S.R.: You kept a flair of *Okkupatsiya,* a special ironic outlook on Belarus, in *Masakra* as well…

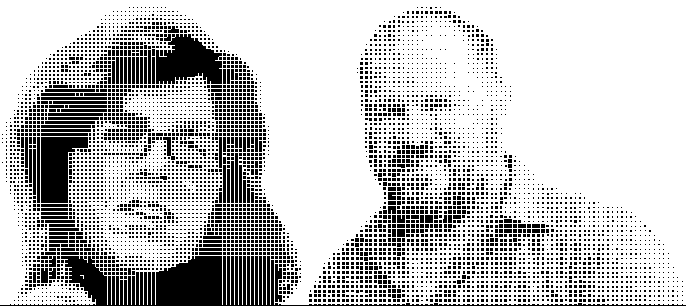
A.K.: I did it deliberately. In my view, Belarus does not have an expressive national culture. Belarusians are strange people; they always try to hide somewhere. So we needed to make a "salient" movie, such as *Masakra*, a "horror." It's obviously not a horror; it is a love story. However, it became known only because it was the first Belarus-made horror movie. We need insolent things in Belarus, such as straw "stories" by Artur Klinov, Vladimir Tsesler's posters or Adam Hlobus' short fiction stories. We have many talented people in Belarus who, unfortunately, cannot fulfill themselves. [The

state] tries to even them out, to reduce them to some common denominator, to make them behave like everybody else. When I worked on *Masakra,* I was trying to look for "my men." When I invited Klinov to be the production designer, people at Belarusfilm were in shock. They could not understand why I needed to invite someone if they had their own staff designers. That urged and provoked me as well, since I wanted badly to break all those stereotypes.

S.R.: Irony, which is your personal style, seems to be very relevant to Belarusian realities. It becomes one of those possible "escapes": people's laughter mocks and debunks things…

A.K.: You're right, we have some kind of carnival here. As for traditions, I think that any culture is the history of the selected few. I don't know what Belarusian culture is. Hlobus, Klinov, Khadanovich… Recently I was impressed by a young guy, Vitali Ryzhkov. I was stunned by the podcast of his verses. When I told him that straightforwardly, he got slightly embarrassed and said he was recording a professional CD. I will be his first buyer. This is just great. However, these are isolated cases. Perhaps, people like him may achieve something. Yet, the majority are rural people who don't need any culture. Remember Nadia Leger, who saw Paris on a postcard and decided that she needed to get there? Later, she became the wife of the French painter Fernand Leger. She'd continue digging her kitchen garden otherwise… It is a pity that the process of self-identification is so slow in Belarus. I can't really imagine when Belarusian history will "shoot" at last.

The Minister of Culture has found that Belarusian contemporary art has not been represented at the Venice Biennale for 116 years. The minister understands the situation; he might even wish to speak proudly of his artists, yet he can praise no one who animadverts on the political system and whose biography does not shrink from calling them "banished."



THERE ARE STILL SOME ARTISTS OUT THERE

MONIKA SZEWCZYK, ANDREI DUREIKA – INTERVIEW

Magdalena Linkowska: You have often showcased Belarusian artists. How do you find this cooperation?

Monika Szewczyk: Artistic Belarus is an area that the Arsenal Gallery is very eager to cooperate with, mostly because of a sense of mission, but also due to shared experience. I remember the time when Polish artists were in a similar situation; they bogged down outside mainstream art and in deep isolation, and any contact with the West, and any possibility of exhibiting at an international exhibition were so important to us.

This sense of mission coincides with a sense of powerlessness. We have a very fragmented picture of what happens in Belarus, and we feel that we fail to reach the right places. I am rather doubtful whether we have actually penetrated this area, despite the fact that I was sending in my associates for research, and I used to travel to Minsk and Grodno myself; I did an exhibition of our collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Minsk, and also held several events featuring Belarusian artists locally.

I have an impression, or rather I hope, that there must be a group of artists we have never encountered. All presentations of Belarusian art are always attended by the same set of artists; still, it seems virtually impossible that there is no fresh blood, no young and alternative artists. In Ukraine, this phenomenon was represented by the R.E.P. group which relied on community-building. If the academy does not meet our expectations, if there is no good quality state gallery offering good conditions to artists, then they form communities (like the R.E.P.), exhibit only in their own studios, establish support groups, and work together; I am more than sure that this is happening somewhere in Belarus.

Such an independent area dealing with contemporary art is the "Y" Gallery in Minsk. However, its activity is overshadowed with the mounting concern about how long they will manage to go on as an independent entity.

M.L.: Does the same set of names you have mentioned earlier also appear in the forthcoming Arsenal's exhibition *Journey to the East* (done for the Polish EU presidency)?

M.Sz.: Yes, predominantly. Some of the names from *Journey to the East* overlap with those shown in Zacheta's *Opening the Doors*. *Journey to the East* is a big project. It will bring together artists from six Eastern European countries.[1]

M.L.: What is your cooperation with Belarus like in terms of organization and communication? What kind of partners are the institutions from Minsk and other cities?

M.Sz.: Frankly, the choice as to who you can work with is very limited; they suffer from a genuine shortage of institutions. We try to get to independent curators, such as Lena Prents. Never have I tried to import Belarusian exhibitions via Belarusian cultural institutions; I have no idea who I should go to in order to fix it. If we decided to cooperate with an institution, it was the Polish Institute in Minsk.

1 The six countries of the Eastern Partnership program: Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

There is no symmetry in the functioning of cultural institutions in Poland and Belarus, and I do not mean the financial disparity but the programming. We assume very different attitudes and make different choices. Leon Tarasewicz's exhibition is the absolute upper limit of what Belarus is able to digest from Polish art. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Minsk, despite its name and the location in a European capital, advocates a very conservative approach which has little to do with present-day art.

There are still some artists out there

It seems to me that one of the major problems of Belarus is that there are no institutions that would be involved in contemporary art in a substantive and effective way, and would seek new contacts and furnish adequate conditions for working artists. No local college is open to new artistic ideas; instead, their first priority is to teach skills. That is why so many Belarusians come to study at German and Polish universities. It is not only about choosing a better school. Those who really want to go into contemporary art cannot find fulfilment in a country where they officially teach only crafts and the painting of still lifes. It drains you of energy.

M.L.: Andrei, you used to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Minsk for a while. What was is like, and what is it like today?

Andrei Dureika: In Belarus, there is a popular saying, or even a peculiar motto, that "There are no museums, no academies, no galleries, but some artists are still left." It means: it is bad indeed, yet not abysmal. Belarus does not seem to lack anything, yet everything it has belongs to the domain of the state nomenklatura. We have a large Palace of Art, the artistic association, the academy, but all these have not changed much since the Brezhniev era. The members of the academia have been occupying their positions for twenty years and everything stays the same.

In the early 1990s, it dawned on the authorities that there were people of different views: rightist and leftist, modernity- and progress-oriented. People who made the contemporary art of the time were trained at universities, in high schools, and in various courses. Those in power believed that if they had been allowed to graduate, this would have legitimized their actions. So, it was no more than two or three years that everything was brought to a halt. Close to three hundred students were expelled from university.

At that time, I was involved in the famous exhibition organized by Igor Tishin, an art school teacher in Minsk. The exhibition was entitled *Lessons of Foul Art*. He alluded to the exhibition of *Degraded Art*, shown in Germany in the late 1930s. This exhibition displayed the works of all those expelled from university. We managed to prove the existence of contemporary art in Belarus. They showed me the door on the exhibition day. It was 1992.

I did not leave Belarus right away. Back then, Minsk still run several galleries that you could work with. The country was not sealed yet. Only later the situation changed and those galleries were levied very heavy taxes and many closed down. It became clear that the political situation in the country was getting worse; we were disillusioned that someone was going to straighten it out.

1997 saw our last exhibition *Todesschaft*. After that, we left. Not even a year later, everyone from our team went to study in the West. We were mainly heading for Poland and Germany. Initially, I myself planned to settle in Poznan, where some of my mates did their programs, but ultimately I went to Düsseldorf.

Around twenty people from my artistic fraternity got into Düsseldorf universities. Belarusian students also graduated in other countries, at universities in Paris or Amsterdam. We are in almost all important schools across Europe. This makes me take a sanguine view, since throughout the 20th century, Belarusian artists did not have the option to do university programs outside the country. On the one hand, the situation is unpromising because these people are unknown in their homeland. On the other, they have won recognition in Western artistic circles, and anyone in Belarus who seeks information about them can learn about their accomplishments from the Western media.

Another important peculiarity in Belarusian culture is that there is a number of active artists without any artistic training, such as Igor Savchenko, or Artur Klinau, or the creators representing the photographers' school: Sergey Kozhemyakin, Uladzimir Parfianok, Galina Moskaleva; they started their career back in the Soviet era. These people reveal an utterly different outlook on life and art.

Paweł Laufer: What is the Belarusian reception of Andrei Dureika, an artist who made his career and name abroad?



There are still some artists out there

A.D.: Artists much better known than me, such as Alexej Koschkarov, Aleksander Komarov, Marina Naprushkina, whose pieces are exhibited in museums, have not managed to make their way to the awareness of Belarusian artistic circles. No one talks about them, who will? Sometimes their friends, or people from the academy; yet, the latter will always tell some concocted stories, or create myths. I am doubtful whether our activity in the West has any wider impact on young artists from the academy.

P.L.: What is the reaction of the official artistic fraternity or the administration when they learn that an artist of Belarusian descent succeeds in the world? Are they inclined towards praising them and claiming the success, or do they rather try to stifle it?

A.D.: It seems that the response is twofold. I feel that something has changed recently. For example, after Sharangovich resigned as the director of the Museum of Modern Art, Ms Sharangivich was appointed his successor.

P.L: His wife?

A.D.: Daughter. Well, it sounds like a joke, but corruption and clannishness come as a standard in our culture. The new director seems though to better understand that times have changed and the cultural policy needs to follow up.

One of her first initiatives was an attempt to bring Leon Tarasewicz's exhibition to Belrus. She asked me to call him on this. The idea failed because

Tarasiewicz said that he had once put on an exhibition in Belarus and knew what it was like. At the same time, the Museum of Art in Vitebsk painted over his work that had been there since the In-Formation Festival of Contemporary Art in the 1990s.

Also, there has been a two-year debate on the need to represent Belarus at the Venice Biennale. The Minister of Culture, a young man, has found that Belarusian contemporary art has not been represented at the Venice Biennale for 116 years. The minister understands the situation; he might even wish to speak proudly of them, yet he cannot praise anyone who animadverts on the political systems and whose biography does not shrink from calling them "banished". And this is the problem. In Venice, I met Mikhail Barazna, the curator of the Belarusian pavilion. He is the head of the Belarusian State Academy of Fine Arts in Minsk, which tells more than a lot about the way the minister selects the people who are supposed to represent the country outside. In short, the minister appoints the curator; this choice is very simple, he says, "You are the head of the academy, so you will be the curator." Next, he turns to the director of the Museum of Modern Art, "You are the museum director, so you will be the exhibition organizer." The academy head comes to the dean of the Faculty of Interior Architecture and Design and says, "You do the show." The dean meets the artists and asks, "Do you have any works?" "Yes, we do!" "Well, I take them." The Biennale opens on 31st and artists come on 32nd and everything is ready. Obviously, there is a bit of an exaggeration in this description; the people who are behind it are not that naive, they are the people of art anyway; still, there is immense red tape and there is no real, independent and professional exhibition.

M.L.: Monika, how did you find the Belarusian pavilion?

M.Sz.: As regards the selection of artists, it is, say, civilized. Actually closer to the contemporary, but also representing a kind of multi-faceted conformism. It is manifested through the artists, but also through the museum where the research was done and where they found that they had nothing else to show but that. So, there is Artur Klinau and Viktor Petrov – they have been



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part of contemporary art for long and are already considered classics. They are in a way "safe" to show because you can no longer challenge their artistic heritage; it can no longer be questioned. We need to check the feedback after the exhibition and the way it will influence the cultural policy of Minsk. One swallow does not make a summer – it is important that this trend will be continued for two years.

P.L.: Andrei, what should be changed to keep artists in Belarus?

A.D.: First, the Belarusian Academy of Fine Arts is understaffed, in the sense that it is lacking in quality teachers. The other day, to my surprise, I found that some of my colleagues, immersed in the world of art for twenty years, had huge gaps in their knowledge. For example, they do not know who Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt are, let alone other key American artists. Without this knowledge, we would not be able to attend classes in the schools of Düsseldorf and Amsterdam.

Having collated the educational systems in the West and in Belarus, I reckon the academy has to be a more open institution. The same people holding the same positions for twenty years – this situation should be definitely dealt with. In the West, the teaching staff are constantly fluctuating, and we also have to abandon this Soviet system of education and artistic creation in which you only stick to your brief. An artist follows his or her individual rhythm.

Another issue is the Museum of Contemporary Art. This institution is contemporary by name only. The museum is housed in a former restaurant and looks like it used to. Nothing has changed, not even floor tiles. No work by

any artist will look good in this setting. They are now talking about offering the museum some additional space near the square in Chelyuskinites Park.

Artistic groups in Belarus are sealed. The same names feature in all institutions. This is yet another problem. In Minsk, you enter one group and you cannot leave it.

In Belarus, there is almost no independent press that could respond to art. There is a lack of people dealing with art criticism who would speak about what is good and what is bad, and justify it.

M.L.: Which phenomena, events, or places that resist this situation can be regarded as positive and outspoken examples?

A.D.: Recent years have seen the emergence of the "Y" Gallery that Monika has mentioned earlier. Formerly, it was known as the Podzemka. Its role in Minsk is now pivotal. This is partly a commercial gallery and I really like this fact. On one hand, they implement commercial projects and sell art, which it still not so easy in Minsk; on the other, the gallery management try different strategies of art presentation. The gallery is more like a club or a culture centre, where exhibitions coincide with lectures, discussions, film screenings, and concerts. But again the problem is that in Minsk everyone can only count up to one. There is only one gallery. This "fossilized" circumstance is downright dangerous.

The "Y" Gallery lacks a clear artistic vision and strategy. Generally, they do a great job, but this is not enough. There must be some competition because art is a struggle of forms, and competition promises development; otherwise, corruption and nepotism will keep coming back. Moreover, the gallery attracts the same closed circle of stakeholders, which is debilitating.

Speaking of noteworthy events, two years ago, there was an exhibition named the Belarusian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale.[2] Until 2011,

2 The Belarusian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale opened in June 2009 at the BelExpo National Exhibition Centre in Minsk. It was the Belarusian artists' response to the lasting absence of Belarusian art from the Venice exhibition. A miniaturized presentation of the exhibited works called the Independent Belarusian Pavilion was to be

Belarus has not participated in the Venice event. In 2009, Ruslan Vashkevich, in liaison with a young curator Lizaveta Mihalchuk, organized a major exhibition of Belarusian contemporary art with a view to showcasing artists who can represent us at this great international exhibition.

Another important event is the Dach festival with its twelve editions. This initiative travels between Berlin and Minsk every year. However, its target is a more underground environment; it is marked by a completely different aesthetics, more thrash or post-punk-like, with a wealth of improvisation and performance.

There are still some artists out there

M.Sz.: The project of the Independent Belarusian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale that Andrei referred to is a positive example of the undergoing changes. Of course, the project did not come to fruition in Venice, but this, to some extent, prompted the appearance of the Belarusian pavilion in 2011. Certainly, people accountable for the project two years ago were not admitted to participate in this year's initiative; anyway, they did the groundwork. It was half the battle with an unpredictable result, but still you can say – a victory.

M.L.: Belarusian art, or more broadly, the art of Eastern European countries, becomes increasingly appealing for us. Is it only a matter of fashion?

M.Sz.: I think it has been arousing interest for a long time. This interest was long hindered by our "little brother" complex and an indiscriminate admiration of the West. Now, when our situation has changed, we can have a broader picture of things. The area of the former Soviet Union has become more attractive. On the one hand, there is the community factor involved here: we have similar experiences, similar sensitivity, and speak similar languages. On the other, there is the force of progress and the momentum of rapid transformation. The East is a live wire, which is hardly the case with the West. Paradoxically, the liberation of East-Central Europe from forced fraternization has kindled mutual interest.

installed in a mobile cabinet and taken to the Venice Biennale as the embodiment of Belarusian contemporary art. These two events, besides similar names, were intended to draw attention to the condition of Belarusian contemporary art, is downplayed and marginalized in the cultural policy of the country. More at: http://contemporarybelarus.wordpress.com/tag/niezalezny-pawilon-bialorusi-na-biennale-w-wenecji/ and http://art-podzemka.livejournal.com/13033.html

NGO ANALYSIS

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ACTIVITIES OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND NON--GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

In present-day Belarus there is complex legislation (Laws, Presidential Decrees and Orders, Governmental Regulations, etc.) related to the activities of non-profit organizations (NGOs). There are over two hundred legal acts and decisions of local authorities referring to civil society organizations. Moreover, there are only a few pieces of legislation directly related to NGOs and the regulation of their activities in the Republic of Belarus. The Civil Code, the Labor Code, etc. contain the main bulk of regulations, applicable to all legal persons. The paradox of the situation is that with all the numerous regulations related to NGOs, a number of important issues concerning NGO activities are not regulated at all.

The reason behind it is the restrictive nature of the legislation related to the activities of NGOs: the law-makers often aim at restricting or controlling the activities of NGOs, rather than creating or formalizing new mechanisms of the institutionalization of functioning of civil society. Exceptions to this general rule are extremely rare. Often, the "improvement of legislation" in the area of NGOs and political parties implies the legalization of illegal or questionable restrictive practices, previously undertaken by the authorities.

GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR FOUNDING AND OPERATION

The legal framework of NGOs' activities in Belarus includes the Constitution, declaring the right of citizens to freedom of association, and the Civil

Code, regulating the types and legal forms of legal entities. Regarding some organizational and legal forms of NGOs, special regulatory acts were adopted (laws, decrees), as well as operating regulations (instructions) related to particular aspects of their activities. One of the most important piece of legislation of the kind is the Decision of the Ministry of Justice of 30 August 2005 No 48 which provides for samples of documents and guidelines regarding the submission of application forms for the registration of public associations, political parties, trade unions, as well as their structures and unions of these organizations. However, the legal system of Belarus is deformed: the impact of the Constitution and the Civil Code on the development of NGOs is less significant compared with the impact of the Presidential Decrees. Moreover, sometimes, following amendments of a Decree, the law or the Civil Code are adjusted accordingly.

The Civil Code divides all legal entities of Belarus into two types: commercial organizations and non-profit organizations (NGOs), the main criteria for the division being the main objective of the organization. Article 46 of the Civil Code stipulates that an NGO can be founded with social, environmental, charitable, cultural, educational, scientific, and management purposes; for the protection of citizens' health, for the development of physical culture and sport, to meet the spiritual and other non-material needs of citizens, for the protection of the rights and lawful interests of citizens and legal entities, to resolve disputes and conflicts, to provide legal assistance in accordance with the law, as well as for other purposes aimed at achieving public benefits. NGOs can also be founded to meet the material (property) needs of citizens and legal persons in cases described by the law.

The Civil Code lists a number of organizational and legal forms of NGOs. Conventionally, they can be divided into two types based on the following criteria: "membership-based associations" and "property-based associations":

- **Social and religious organizations (associations)** are voluntary associations of citizens, uniting based on their common interests to meet the spiritual and other non-material needs in accordance with the legislation;
- **Republican state-public associations** are membership-based NGOs, their purpose being to implement tasks of national importance;
- **Associations of legal persons (associations and unions)** are NGOs founded by a treaty between commercial organizations and (or) individual entrepreneurs to coordinate their business activities, as well to

represent and protect common property interests or associations of NGOs;

- **Funds** are NGOs without membership, founded by citizens (citizen), and (or) legal persons (legal entity) on the basis of voluntary property contributions, pursuing social, charitable, cultural, or educational goals, to promote the development of physical culture and sports, scientific or other socially useful purposes specified in the charter of the fund;
- **Institution (Establishment)** is an organization founded by a proprietor in order to carry out managerial, social, cultural, or other non-commercial operations, fully or partially funded by the proprietor;
- **Consumer cooperatives** are voluntary associations of citizens or citizens and legal persons based on membership with the purpose to meet the material (property) and other needs of its members by pooling its members' property shares.

The Civil Code list of legal forms of NGOs is not exhaustive. For example, Bar Associations or territorial bodies of self-government make separate forms of NGOs, which are not directly spelled out in the Civil Code.

The main, most common and frequently used form of NGOs in Belarus are public associations (public organizations). They include political parties, trade unions, religious organizations, as well as public associations in the narrow sense (not related to any of the three groups). Each of the above four sub-categories of public associations has a specific law defining their legal status. These laws are subject to constant changes and amendments, aiming mainly at the regulation of the activities of these NGOs. Once a relatively progressive Law of 1994 "On Public Associations," following revisions in 1999 and 2005, substantially limited NGO activities. Also, the reform of the Law in early 2010 conducted under the banner of "liberalization" made no improvements of the content.

It is important to note that public associations remained in the minds of the population as "real NGOs" due to the fact that Belarusians were aware of the existence of such organizations since the Soviet era. For example, an active watch-dog organization "The Society for the Preservation of Monuments" was founded in the 1970s under the auspices of the Soviet regime. The legislation frequently refers mainly to public associations and says nothing about other forms of NGOs. For instance, only public associations can

engage in various forms of social control, express public opinion in a civil trial, nominate representatives to election commissions, public boards, etc. Of all the NGOs, only public associations have a right to stage events (rallies, marches, demonstrations).

Other forms of NGOs (funds, institutions, cooperatives) have fewer rights of the kind and are less known to Belarusians. This shortcoming is compensated by less attention of the law-makers to these forms. Before 2005 the initiatives that could not be registered as public associations were registered as funds: funds could not nominate observers at polling stations, they were, however, registered as legal entities and could receive donations and hold events.

Today, "institutions" still play a similar role of an "asylum". During the 2010 presidential election this legal form was used to hold a political campaign. There is no specific legislation concerning this type of NGOs, "institutions" are registered following the submission of an application, while e.g. funds and public associations are granted permission for registration.

All in all, legislation creates difficult conditions for the establishment of public associations and funds as well envisages a complicated procedure of registration with the possibility of arbitrary denial of registration. As a rule, the denial of registration of new NGOs in Belarus is very common and often politically motivated. The registration authority belongs to the Ministry of Justice whose decisions may be appealed against in court. However, courts would never find decisions regarding the refusal of registration ungrounded and almost always take the side of the registration authority.

A serious obstacle for the registration of new NGOs, including trade unions, religious organizations, and political parties, is a legal requirement to have an office in a nonresidential building, regardless of the size of the organization. Any NGO, a small branch office of a political party, or a public association (some of them may have three members and have no legal status), cannot be registered at the address of a private apartment of the founder. It is an obvious deviation of the Belarusian legislation from the generally accepted standards concerning the regulation of NGOs. It is generally accepted that the conditions set for NGOs should not be worse than the conditions set for commercial organizations; nevertheless, the Belarusian law allows the founder of a private unitary company to have a legal address in a private apartment, whereas this option is not available for NGOs.

SPECIFIC REGULATIONS OF SOME TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

Regulatory restrictions and control over NGOs in certain areas of activity is not a common practice in Belarus. It would be more accurate to say that such restrictions and control over NGOs dealing with human rights and youth policy is implemented *de facto*, not being formalized *de jure*.

The government also pays particular attention to the structures operating without state registration. The non-registered public associations and funds are prohibited and their actions prosecuted under the Criminal Code; thereby the activities of the non-registered groups are limited. The aforementioned factor is behind the almost clandestine nature of the majority of non-registered initiatives, including the political ones – their existence is under constant threat of sanctions by the state.

Following the adoption of the Presidential Decree of 26 January 1999 No 2, all organizations not registered by the government were banned in Belarus. Later, the ban was introduced to the Law "On Political Parties" and "On Public Associations," administrative liability being established for its violation with a possible penalty of fine or arrest for up to fifteen days.

In 2005 the situation with the prohibition of the activities of the non--registered associations significantly deteriorated with the introduction of criminal liability. On 15 December 2005 the Criminal Code of Belarus was amended with Article 193.1, namely the "Illegal Organization of a Public Association, a Religious Organization or a Fund, or Participation in Their Activities." It envisages punishment by fine or imprisonment for up to two years for the participation in the activities of non-registered political parties, other public associations, religious organizations, or funds (regardless of the objectives or types of activities of such associations).

The previously existing Article 193 of the Criminal Code, envisaging punishment for activities of a public association that violate the rights of citizens, was amended with Part 2, increasing the liability with prison sentence for up to three years if the activities were carried out by an non--registered association or party.

On 1 May 2011 human rights organizations reported eighteen persons found guilty under Article 193.1 in 2006–2009. There were no acquitted under Article 193.1. Moreover, the Prosecutor's Office issued a number of warnings to the members of the liquidated and non-registered NGOs,

demanding them to stop their illegal activities on behalf of non-registered organizations, threatening with criminal prosecution under Article 193.1. Given the practical inability to register an NGO (which is undesirable for the incumbent government), the mere existence of this article makes it impossible to exercise freedom of association in Belarus.

In 2003–2005 Belarus lived through a wave of forced liquidations of public associations by courts. Grounds for liquidations were often not based on the law, or quoted minor and petty violations of secondary regulations (e.g. the rules regarding filling in paper application forms). Back then the majority of NGOs continued functioning regardless of the fact they were denied registration by the authorities, and regardless of the threat of criminal prosecution for non-registered activities. Some political parties were liquidated by the Supreme Court's decision: in 2004 the Labor Party, in 2007 the Ecological Party of Greens "BEZ" and Women's Party "Nadzeya."

The participation of NGOs in the elections (nomination of candidates, members of the commissions, observers) is regulated by the Electoral Code. Indeed, political parties are the key players during the elections; however, the role of public associations is also significant. In general, the difference between parties and public associations in this regard is that parties may nominate candidates, while associations may nominate only members of commissions and observers.

Both parties and NGOs can receive donations from local counterparts (from individuals or via sponsorship). A Presidential Decree sets out a list of purposes the legal entities can make donations (sponsorship) for. The financing of political parties from abroad or of foreign origin is prohibited. In order to receive donations or grants from abroad, NGOs are required to register them with a special supervisory body. In practice, this entails frequent violations of these requirements by many NGOs, the authorities generally disregarding these violations (with rare exceptions associated with obtaining political funding from abroad).

Until recently membership dues were important sources of financing for public associations. However, in the beginning of 2010 a new Tax Code was adopted which stipulates that an amount of dues shall be exempt from taxation only to the extent defined by the Charter of the organization. Entrepreneurial activities are feasible for funds and institutions, and partially for political parties (e.g. sales of party attributes); other types of

NGOs can engage in entrepreneurship only when they become founders of a separate commercial enterprise.

DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT OF NGOS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The common framework described above, regarding the conditions and restrictions on the activities of NGOs, influences the development of NGOs, including political parties. Due to the unfavorable conditions for the activities of NGOs, grassroots initiatives in Belarus do not naturally become professional and rarely develop to become NGOs. Accordingly, the restrictions on the establishment of NGOs and the overall control over the population's involvement lead to the lack of increase in local initiatives: the majority of local initiatives are set to dissolve right after the objectives have been reached and only some of them (as a rule, one or two leaders) reach out to the professional public sector.

The number of public associations is not rising.

	30 October 2003	1 January 2004	1 January 2005	1 January 2006	1 March 2007	1 January 2008	1 January 2009	1 January 2010	1 January 2011
The number of newly registered public associations (in a year)	94	155	61	85	100	94	–	94	134
Total number of registered NGOs (by the date)	2248	2214	2259	2247	2248	2255	2221	2225	2325

The Ministry of Justice reported that as of 1 January 2011 there were 35 registered professional associations, 22,790 trade union organizations, 2325 public associations, including 231 international, 675 national, and 1419 local. 35,634 institutional structures of public associations were registered.

25 unions (associations) of public associations, 99 funds (10 international, 4 national, and 85 local) were registered.

The following organizations are registered in Belarus: 561 fitness and sports associations, 393 charity associations, 216 youth associations (32 out of them being children associations), 204 educational, cultural, recreational, and educational associations, 109 public associations dealing with ethnic minorities and 83 public associations of war and labor veterans, 79 techno-scientific associations, 67 public associations dealing with environmental protection and the protection of historical and cultural monuments, 49 creativity associations, 31 women's associations, and 533 others.

In 2010, the Ministry of Justice, the justice departments of regional executive committees and the Minsk city executive committee reported the registration of 134 new public associations (5 international, 15 national, and 114 local) and 14 new funds (1 international and 13 local). The data provided by the Ministry of Justice shows an increase in the number of registered public associations. The number of newly registered public associations in 2010 is the highest since 2003. In 2010 the most of the registered NGOs were sports associations (49). Other registered NGOs were as follows: 24 recreational, amateur; 7 providing assistance to people with disabilities; 5 minority organizations; 5 environmental, sustainable development, agro-ecotourism ones; 4 associations of professionals; 3 promoting healthy lifestyles; 3 for animal protection; 3 charity organizations; 2 consumer protection associations; 2 women's and gender associations; 1 veteran organization, and 17 others (youth associations were not listed as a separate category; however, their number is considerably high). The highest number of NGOs was registered in Minsk, i.e. 54 organizations, followed by the Brest Oblast (16 organizations). In contrast, only three new organizations were registered in the Minsk Oblast and 5 in the Mogilev Oblast. During this period not a single organization dealing with human rights protection or democratization was registered (data provided by the Center for Legal Transformation).

At the moment, there are 15 political parties and 976 local party organizations registered in Belarus; however, few of them are active (the revival of parties in 2010 in connection with two election campaigns was rather perfunctory). The registration of a political party requires at least one thousand founders representing the majority of the regions of the country and

the city of Minsk. The legislative grounds for a refusal of registration allow justice officials to make arbitrary refusals of registration, based on their own interpretation of the alleged violations of the founding procedures. As a result, since 2000 not a single new political party was registered in Belarus. Many groups applying for the registration of a political party were denied registration by the government: the Party of Freedom and Progress was denied registration four times between 2003–2009; the authorities also refused to register the Belarusian Christian Democratic party, the Belarusian Party of Workers, and the Belarusian Communist Party of Workers.

Nevertheless, several political groups act without formal registration (acting as "the founding committees of a party"), unable to see the opportunity to register due to their oppositional attitude towards the authorities. Local branches of the parties also faced with the refusal of registration for minor violations. In general, the non-registered political groups have more freedom to maneuver than the registered ones: they are not afraid of being stripped of registration and not bound by the requirement to have more than a thousand members and a certain number of regional offices. At the same time, the non-registered parties (or rather the Founding Committees), *a priori*, are not able to obtain financing, which means they are "free" to engage in initially illegal fundraising, attracting funding from abroad, often performing as civil society organizations or the media, not as a political party.

Registration practices concerning trade unions prove the negative attitude towards the trade unions which are not members of the Federation of Trade Unions supported by the government. The lack of freedom of association of workers has been the subject of criticism of Belarus by the International Labor Organization on a number of occasions, including the initiation by ILO of several investigation missions and the implementation of sanctions.

A NEW DRAFT LAW "ON THE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS"

A new law "On the Nonprofit Organizations" is being drafted in Belarus at the initiative of the Presidential Administration. This new law will affect the interests of all public associations, institutions, political parties, trade unions, religious organizations, and other nonprofit organizations. The draft was supposed to be completed by the Ministry of Justice in December 2010

and, in March 2011, presented to the Parliament. However, in due time the draft was not submitted to the Parliament. The initial draft elaborated by the Ministry in cooperation with the Institute for Legislative Activities was returned to the drafters to rework after it received negative feedback from a number of influential NGOs as well as from a number of ministries.

In 2010 a number of NGOs made attempts to influence the content of the future law. Common concern expressed by the organizations was that in 2010 they did not have access to the concept of the draft available to developers. Proposals from religious, social, charity, environmental, human rights organizations were sent to the Ministry of Justice. The degree of coordination among these NGOs in 2010 was low and existed mostly in the form of an exchange of information about undertaken actions at round tables; sometimes individual plans for future actions were coordinated. A coordinated joint action was planned only in late 2010, when the draft developed by the Ministry of Justice „leaked." The attempts to involve the Public Advisory Council of the Presidential Administration in a dialogue to discuss the draft have also failed.

Based on the available unofficial text of the draft law the following conclusions can be reached. The draft envisages strict rules and restrictions on the registration for all the forms of NGOs, currently in place for public associations only, abolishing the possibility of the registration of institutions and associations based on the application principle. Also, the draft law did not meet expectations concerning the legal address of NGOs, i.e. it does not provide for the opportunity to register an NGO in the place of residence of the founder. The accountability of NGOs to the government agencies becomes more complex and advanced; the concept of the "conflict of interest" in the work of NGOs is introduced. The former founders of public organizations closed following court decision are banned from founding new associations.

Some provisions of the draft can be considered as improving the situation of NGOs. Obviously, they were imbedded from the proposals sent to the developers over the past year.

Many NGOs believe that the law-makers should focus more on the positive provisions that will encourage the development of NGOs rather than on restrictive and controlling standards: on the establishment of public councils under the auspices of state bodies, on the development of the social order

of the state, and on the status of organizations of social importance. The introduction of the concept of the "conflict of interests" refers to the understanding the law makers have regarding the existing problems of NGOs. All these provisions would create favorable climate for NGOs and should lie at the core of the new law if it indeed intends to develop the third sector.

It can be asserted that, as proposed, the draft was meant to "liberate" the civil initiative within the set limits (unlike previous attempts to introduce punitive or administrative control). In any case, given that the draft does not envisage the abolition of the existing laws on public associations, political parties, and trade unions, its potential positive effect will be limited.

In general, Belarusian NGOs were not actively interested in working on the draft and played a passive role. Those NGOs interested in working on the draft law can be divided into two groups: 1) lobbying specific interests of individual NGOs or groups of NGOs and 2) lobbying the common interests of civil society. Moreover, the NGOs used different means. Some NGOs believe that the best result is achieved by talks behind the scenes, where highly skilled lobbyists negotiate with the authorities and parliamentarians. Others believe the work on the draft law is of the utmost importance and should involve all NGOs united by a common goal. The contradictions between these approaches are tactical by nature and not of crucial importance for the advocated interests.

Currently, the process of adoption of the law has been paused. The officials say this pause will last at least until the end of 2011. Therefore, NGOs still have the time to advance their interests regarding the all-important piece of legislation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The development and adoption of the new NGO law creates an opportunity to influence the legal frameworks set for NGOs in Belarus. In particular, this moment can be used to fill in the gaps in legislation and to introduce positive European practices and standards to the Belarusian legislation. Moreover, the background justification of the initial draft says the authors paid particular attention to the European experience while drafting new NGO regulations.

Legal framework for the activities of political parties and non--governmental organizations

It is uncertain whether the legal framework for the activities of NGOs and political parties will be improved significantly. Perhaps one should not aim at radical changes but rather at the revision of poor legislation. For instance, Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code has been assessed by the Belarusian authorities as subject to possible amendments (in 2009 they announced the potential replacement of criminal liability for the activities of non-registered organizations with administrative liability).

It is important to bring the so-called "dialog" rules to the attention of the Belarusian lawmakers, i.e. the rules which meet common understanding that they should be introduced into the Belarusian legal system; however, the law-makers lack the vision about what they should look like (social order, the Ombudsman, transformation to the proportional electoral system, other provisions of the electoral law). It is important to bear in mind that talks about the imminent introduction of the proportional electoral system have no grounds at the moment and that this reform is likely to require changes of the Constitution concerning the recall of deputies, which is unlikely. In general, the reform of the Electoral Code should be considered separately from the legal status of political parties and NGOs.

The government will pay particular attention to the regulation of the new forms of NGOs: funds, institutions, and consumer cooperatives. Provided that these forms often play the role of an "asylum" for community initiatives, it is essential to promote the introduction of European standards to the Belarusian legislation in this regard. This can be facilitated by pro-active interactions with the Belarusian law-makers and non-parliamentary institutions which can affect the legislative process: relevant departments of the Presidential Administration, the National Centre of Legislation and Legal Studies, the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, the Ministry of Justice, and other institutions.

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Any association that is not controlled by the state, any attempt to think or act independently, is automatically regarded in Belarus as politics, as approval or disapproval of the president's and government's course.



VACLAU ARESHKA

NON-GOVERNMENTAL SECTOR IN BELARUS: TRADITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The story of Belarusian public associations, non-governmental organizations, often referred to as the "third sector," began long ago. Intellectual and cultural study circles, educational initiatives, and self-help organization emerged on the territories of present-day Belarus as far back as in the 19th century. Civic initiatives developed there since the Second Polish Republic and even in the communist BSSR.

ORIGINS

The peculiarity of the modern third sector in Belarus originates from Soviet times, when two totally different trends claimed to represent the civil movement. One of them always was on the side of the government. It united either pro-government or state-founded organizations, tasked to control and shape the ideology, morality, the way of life, education and upbringing

of as many Soviet citizens as possible. Nearly all "public associations" in the USSR and BSSR were part of that trend: sport clubs, professional societies, associations of writers and artists, philatelists and readers, children's "non-political" organizations, such as *pioneers* and *oktyabryata* (*October Children, a communist organization of young schoolchildren, active during the Soviet period – translator's note*), or even dance and choir groups.

The second trend involved the wave of "informal" initiatives. Those initiatives were set up by people who wanted to talk sincerely and free of any ideology about arts and philosophy, to exchange their *samizdat* translations of Western science fiction, listen to The Beatles, etc. In the decade before *perestroika*, they spread throughout the whole Soviet Union. The first sprouts of civil society were pushing through totalitarian "asphalt." The whole Soviet society, the whole "socialist camp" began to disintegrate. Neither the Communist Party nor the KGB were able to control this ad-hoc movement.

Informal circles of artists, writers, scientists who struggled for a national cultural renaissance started to emerge in Belarus already in the late '60s. In the '80s, Belarusian cultural initiatives were the first to form "real" organizations of *neformaly* (party activists and Soviet press used this word to name members of informal youth groups, independent of communist rulers).

The Communist Party and its youth wing *komsomol* were desperately trying to control *neformaly,* sometimes by offering them "assistance" or by creating "pseudo informal" groups. However, it was too late. People's yearning for freedom, civic activeness defined the country's destiny. The Belarusian Popular Front emerged from cultural and youth informal organizations in the fall of 1988. It aimed higher than a Belarusian cultural renaissance as such; its goal was to bring about political freedom.

In the late '80s – early '90s, thousands of structures of civil society, including public associations and civic movements, started up in Belarus (which became independent in 1991). Nearly all of them did so without any external support, based on the will and financial means of Belarusians, who seemed to wake up after years of totalitarian lethargy. The majority of those associations were short-lived, yet they served the important role of the basis for the next generation of organizations with a more serious approach to goal-setting and development. Those new organizations set up contacts with partners and donor organizations. The Open Society Foundation was among the first to support Belarusian civil society. Belarusians were also

actively learning from the experience of Poland, which experienced a much more rapid political and social transformation than Belarus.

The post-Soviet Belarus had a unique situation before 1995. NGOs, independent of the government, were blossoming. Enjoying positive public opinion and good press, they could find sources of financial assistance. Many former GONGOs (governmental NGOs) either shut down or became outsiders dependent on scarce state rations. Some of them, like the Architectural Heritage Society, which had socially beneficial tasks, gradually transformed into more "real" NGOs.

That period ended after Alexander Lukashenko was elected president of Belarus. Having grabbed power in 1994, this former state farm director began to build a system of vertical rule, free of any citizen control. In 1996, Lukashenko in his "war on freedom" attacked the third sector. The Open Society Foundation was expelled from the country, followed by several other donors' organizations. The stringent decree on re-registration of public associations, parties, and trade unions was signed. An organization could be re-registered only if it was loyal to the authorities. As a result, many organizations lost their licenses. Later, the Penal Code was modified to include liability for actions "by the name of an unregistered organization." The NGO work was becoming more and more dangerous.

Lukashenko went back to the old Soviet approach to the "public," or "social," sector: he started to support or create GONGOs. For instance, he revived numerous associations of "veterans of war and labor," as well as youth and children's associations. The most vivid example was BRSM (Belarusian National Union of Youth) – an "avant-garde" of false patriotism and servile upbringing, sponsored by taxpayer's money.

Following Soviet trends, in the middle of the '90s Belarusian NGOs split into "democratic" ones and those who could not bear or understand democracy. The Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs of Belarus, created in 1997 and growing to more than seven hundred members in 1999, didn't hesitate to take the pro-democratic side.

Lukashenko's war on civil society has been going on for more than fifteen years. In 1999, Belarus had more than 2,500 registered NGOs. That number decreased by half after re-registration. Currently, registration permits continue to serve as a sieve through which only those can sift who are somehow "useful" to the dictatorial regime. Hundreds of NGO activists

have been persecuted since then, hundreds of offices have been destroyed. Civil movement activists who identify themselves as "democratic" got used to clandestine work.

In an attempt to keep balance between financial support from Russia and the West, in 2008–2010 Lukashenko tried to stage a "liberalization" play for the international community.

For instance, the authorities started to talk more about democracy and human rights. They arrested activists less often, gave registration permits to several organizations with the democratic agenda, and invited the third sector experts to participate in dictator's "public councils." Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Europe was allowed to play the game of dialogue with the regime with the participation of NGOs.

After the presidential election in December 2010 the "liberalization" was over. Searches and arrests resumed. That was the end of the liberal rhetoric.

NOWADAYS

The third sector is an integral part of society. Belarusian society nowadays is a long way off the principles of a normal civil society. As in the majority of post-Soviet nations, it demonstrates the lack of organized civil participation, doesn't have firm liberal traditions and is distinguished by the low level of social trust and cooperation. A significant part of the population lives in the spirit of Soviet traditions preserved by Lukashenko, dependent on state and corporate patronage. Belarusians rely on individual forms of articulation of their private interests rather than mutual aid mechanisms. Traditional forms of social communication, destroyed in Soviet times, have not been revived, and this explains why Belarusian society does not have strong civic self-organization or solidarity. The understanding of how people can defend their interests and rights and make a difference through associations comes very slowly.

Those who choose the third sector are in a way the elite of Belarusian society. They are mostly people who realize the need for social solidarity as well as understand the prospects of joint articulation of their interests and the defense of their rights. They are rather well-educated: according to polls, 80% have college education. They are usually sensitive to such values

as freedom, human rights, independence, and are highly motivated to be engaged in social activities. Many of them find like-minded environment and opportunities for self-realization only in NGOs. Thus, the third sector in Belarus unites people who are supporting social and political changes, are ready to work to achieve them, and have necessary qualities for this kind of work: a high level of education, ambitions, communicative skills and knowledge that are unclaimed by state institutions.

One should keep in mind that the picture above does not describe GONGOs that are built on the principles of bureaucratic structures. Those organizations bring up the new generation of Lukashenko's "vertical" hierarchy and provide employment for retired officials.

As Belarusian society in general, the third sector can be divided into three parts, based on the attitude to the government.

Let us place the whole bulk of NGOs on an imaginary axis. At one end of the axis we will see several hundred of NGOs that are clearly stating their democratic values. A significant number of them, whether they are human rights, youth, educational, or cultural organizations, are not registered.

At the other end of the axis there is a bulk of NGOs created by the government or demonstrating their loyalty to the authorities. Neither unregistered associations nor spontaneous, grass root initiatives can be found in this group.

Between those "poles" a big mass of various organizations is spread. They accentuate their "lack of interest" in politics. Still, although they do not articulate support for democratic ideals, many of these organizations become a true school of democracy and contribute to the development of civil society in Belarus. Those are mostly typical grassroots initiatives that have emerged to articulate their small, local problems or even to form a conversational club. In the process of defending their rights and interests, or sometimes during the registration process, they enter the sphere of relations with the authorities, and once in a while mobilize to participate in protests against indifference or arbitrariness of the officials.

In this big mass, one can find associations of pet owners that are gradually transforming into animal rights unions; environmentalists who fight for healthy environment and against the construction of a nuclear power plant; organizations that unite disabled and socially vulnerable people who have to fight for their rights. They possess a significant potential of initiative, motivation, and solidarity that does not require loud political slogans to

be effectively used and can contribute to the erosion of the authoritarian, corporative, and paternalistic model of the Lukashenko-style society.

Since GONGOs are only nominally non-governmental institutions, we will not provide their detailed analysis. Pro-democratic organizations are the most developed, well-structured, and professional actors of the third sector.

One can inquire why we always mention "democratic" and "pro--government," why we assess the attitude of NGOs towards the government. In a modern world, the third sector should be a truly *third* one, i.e. a civic sector, independent of politics and the state. Activists of the Belarusian third sector often debate about the participation of their organizations in the political process, about the level of cooperation with political parties. A number of NGOs act in a unique symbiosis with political parties, supplying new recruits and fundraising for them.

However, in Belarus, any political activity is de-facto banned, and any initiative or attempt to form an association free from governmental control, thinking independently, immediately enters the sphere of politics. Therefore, associations are judged as per their approval or disapproval of the political course of the president and the government. It is not accidental that both the dictator and the majority of population label as "opposition" all those who act to protect their own rights. In this way, Belarusian opposition includes not only parties whose candidates run in elections but also human rights defenders and election observers, independent trade unions, car drivers who demand better parking places, artists who wish to get rid of state censorship when they send their works to exhibitions…

Thus, "democratic" NGOs include virtually all profiles that are normally developed by "non-political" civic initiatives.

Belarus, as it was already stated, has a long democratic tradition of cultural and artistic initiatives. Cultural rights and national traditions require no less protection today than fifty years ago. Several initiatives work to protect those rights and traditions, including the multifaceted initiative Budzma, or more specialized ones like the BMA Group (Belarusian Music Alternative), the Pahonia artists' association, as well as many other groups on the national and local level.

Typically for a non-democratic society, human rights organizations stand out as one of the most advanced NGO branches in Belarus. The largest ones, Viasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, are well-known and widely respected.

Educational associations are traditional and also popular. They cover a wide range of activities, including trainings for civil society leaders and methodological support for teachers in Belarusian regions.

Organizations dealing with local culture and history work in close partnership with educational and history-focused NGOs. History, national and local, takes a special place in the work of the third sector. History and collective memory become instruments of propaganda and mass consciousness manipulations in any non-free society.

Youth organizations in Belarus are often radical and politicized. They are followed and persecuted by the government; their activists are oppressed more often than the activists of other NGOs. They get expelled from educational institutions and even get prison terms. The dictatorial regime applies a wide range of measures to "tame" young people with the help of BRSM and ideological departments. This policy does not leave people unaffected: many university and technical college students are indifferent and passive, uneager to engage in civic activities.

The few independent trade unions distance themselves from democratic NGOs, but also oppose the government. The pro-democratic Belarusian Association of Journalists, BAJ, positions itself as an NGO.

Several expert communities in Belarus also place themselves in the third sector. The most influential among them is the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS).

Large networks of organizations take a special place in Belarusian non-governmental sector. The most influential is still the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs of Belarus. It unites around 300 various NGOs that work in all regions of Belarus. Nowadays, the Assembly acts mostly as a networking structure that helps pursue the interests of the third sector. According to the Assembly, one of its main tasks is to study Belarusian civil society as well as to set its goals and shape strategies.

Large regional associations or unions often serve as resource centers, assisting other organizations in their activities. The Belarusian Association of Resource Centers (BARC) acted as a union of such resource centers. Its former head, the ex-presidential candidate of 2006, Alexander Milinkevich now leads the For Freedom Movement which positions itself as an NGO but is closer to political parties by its nature.

The old debate about the politicization of the third sector obtains new features in Belarus.

A GLANCE INTO TOMORROW

After the December 2010 presidential election we know that Belarus has changed. This was demonstrated by election results: at the polling stations where independent observers could obtain genuine data on voting results, Lukashenka was not re-elected as president. The same is reflected in the results of sociological surveys.

The dictator and his regime get less and less support from the society. The validity of the social contract which was satisfactory for both sides for a range of years is no longer justified. The government is not able to provide the promised living standards for Belarusians, pushing the population to showing less loyalty.

What is the significance of civil society institutions in this situation? Should they transform into political organizations, leading the struggle for changes, or should they act as mediators between the government and the opposition? Which strategy will be chosen or suggested to the society by NGOs?

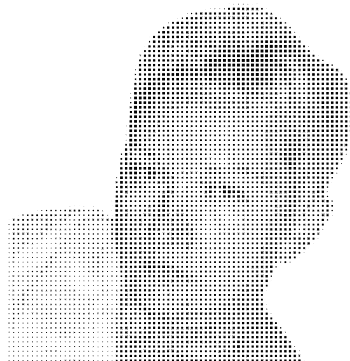
These issues are high on agenda in the Belarusian third sector. Several organizations see their role as facilitators of relations with the European Union, hoping that the EU will influence the Belarusian situation in a positive way. A quite powerful group which calls itself the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is pursuing that goal.

The most important process in the civil society of Belarus, however, is the beginning of the dismantlement of the wall of fear and indifference which has been keeping many people from cooperation, solidarity, from the battle for their interests. New initiatives emerge to help political prisoners, protest against price growth and deteriorating living standards. Very often, they are not supported or even consulted by the third sector "professionals." Such initiatives grow in numbers and membership. They become a new civil society avant-garde, leaving behind many third sector leaders and researchers.

It is quite possible that these emerging grassroots, formed by rank-and-file citizens, will start a new movement to bring about changes and freedom, and will define the future of Belarusian civil society.

VACLAU ARESHKA

The legal framework governing the activities of NGOs in Belarus is very volatile. Over the last fifteen years, it has been many times remodelled with a view to facilitating Lukashenko's regime to eliminate the most robust and committed NGO players.



AGNIESZKA KOMOROWSKA

BELARUSIAN THIRD SECTOR HELD CAPTIVE BY STATE LEGISLATION

The modern non-governmental sector in Belarus began to develop after 1990 along with the surge of independence movements. The early 1990s saw the coexistence of the organizations of old, complex structures and the Communist legacy, and new ones emerging from grassroots effort. The state was far from restricting their activities or helping them in some particular way. In no more than five years, until 1995, one thousand[1] new civil society organizations were established, operating in various fields and moderate in terms of political activity. They were growing undisturbed and building their structures and range of action.

The situation changed after Lukashenko's rise to power and the 1995 and 1996 referenda, which struck at the heart of such issues as the Belarusian language and national symbols, drawing on the tradition of independent Belarus.

Consequently, many organizations decided to redefine their activities and counter that alarming tendency. The first infrastructural organizations

1 Pejda, M. et al. *Nadzieje. Złudzenia. Perspektywy. Społeczeństwo białoruskie 2007*. East European Democratic Centre Association: Warszawa-Minsk, 2007, p. 6.

were founded, such as the Union of Pro-Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations of Belarus and the Belarusian Association of the Centres for the Support of Non-Governmental Organizations.

DECREE, LAW, LIQUIDATION

The legal framework governing the activities of NGOs in Belarus is very volatile. Over the last fifteen years, it has been many times remodelled with a view to facilitating Lukashenko's regime to eliminate the most robust and committed NGO players.

Belarusian third sector held captive by state legislation

A pivotal moment for the pro-democratic non-governmental sector was 1999 and the introduction of No. 2 Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus on some selected principles governing the activities of political parties, trade unions, and other social organizations. Unlike before, when registration was enough to start activity, the decree demanded newly established organizations to obtain "permission to operate" upon registration. In parallel, the new law prohibited the activity of organizations that failed to register under the new procedure and imposed administrative penalties for any such unofficial operation. The decree also provided for the administrative refusal of registration, justified by the aims, methods of operation, name, or membership requirement. Since then, the decision on registration of an organization (or rather practical refusal of registration) rests with the National Registration Committee, whose work is excluded from any public control.

Under the new procedure introduced by the decree, all existing organizations and political parties were required to re-register. From among 2,191 social organizations (exclusive of trade unions) officially listed in 1998, no more than 1,326 passed the re-registration procedure.[2] Many of them were not even able to gather the required registration papers.

After the presidential election in 2001, further organizations were made to wind up; it was a response to the active participation of the third sector in the electoral campaign of Semyon Domash – a president candidate backed by the United Opposition – and the enlisting of the independent

2 Kuzmenkova, T. *Tretij sektor Belarusi: problemy stanovlenija i razvitia*. Minsk, 2004, pp.10–11.

election monitoring teams' assistance. The authorities were bewildered by the strength, scale, and self-organization capacity of the third sector.

In March of the same year, No. 8 Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus was announced on improving the rules for receiving and using foreign aid. It imposed the obligation of reporting every project implemented in Belarus with the support of foreign donors; the reports were to be submitted to the specially appointed Presidential Commission for Humanitarian Aid,[3] which also grated relevant permissions. The commission was also authorized to grant tax exemptions and reliefs to, for example, projects funded from the EU's Tacis program. As for the organizations, the decree also stipulated administrative penalties for non-compliance with this procedure, including forced liquidation.

In such an atmosphere, mass audits among NGOs caused 347 of them to wind up between 2003–2005, often for trivial or alleged reasons.[4]

It was the time when many oldest and well-established pro-democratic NGOs in Belarus were made illegal: the Ratusza from Grodno (an organization founded by Alexander Milinkevich), the Social Initiatives from Gomel, the Kontur Youth Centre, the Belarusian Student Association, the Luckevich Brothers Foundation, and the best-known human rights organization – the "Viasna" Centre for Human Rights. Since that time, many organizations have chosen to continue their activity unofficially; new initiative groups knowingly refuse to get legalized.

In preparation for the presidential election in 2006, the Belarusian authorities implemented an expedited procedure of adopting a series of amendments to the Penal Code and other laws, collectively referred to as the "anti-revolutionary law." The regime feared the risk of going through the Ukrainian scenario of the Orange Revolution, but officially declared that it took preventive measures in the event of civil unrest in the country.

One of the novelties was Article 193.1 of the Penal Code covering the organization of illegal activities by social associations, religious organizations or foundations, or participation in their activities. This article imposes not only administrative sanctions, but also criminal liability penalized by

3 No. 24 Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus of 28 November 2003 on receiving and using non-returnable foreign aid.

4 See: Pejda, M. et. al. *Nadzieje. Złudzenia. Perspektywy. Społeczeństwo białoruskie 2007*. East European Democratic Centre Association: Warszawa-Minsk, 2007, p. 9.

a fine, six months' detention, or two years' imprisonment for organizing or participating in the activities of outlawed organizations. Furthermore, under the amended penal law, those who founded a defunct organization may not establish new ones.

Between 2006 and 2009, seventeen people suffered from penalties under this article. This provision, however, has a much greater effect as a tool of intimidation. In 2010 and in 2011, based on the article in question, the prosecutor's office began to issue warnings to organizations and activists involved in the post-election events of 19 December 2010.

PRO-DEMOCRATIC FORCE

It is extremely difficult to furnish specific data on the actual number and structure of independent organizations in Belarus. For obvious reasons, no research is carried out.

Official figures for January 2011 reveal 2325 registered social organizations, including 561 involved in sports and leisure, 339 in charity, 204 in education, 216 in youths' affairs, 83 in taking care of war invalids, pensioners, and veterans; 67 in nature preservation and the protection of cultural monuments and memorials, 49 are artistic associations, 31 are women's organizations, and 533 pursue other types of activities.

Since 1999, the state has gradually pressed on pro-democratic organizations to go underground, while stimulating and supporting the emergence of new, loyal structures. These are: the Belarusian National Youth Union, the Belarusian National Pioneer Organization, the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations, or the pro-Lukashenko Belarus Writers Association. They boast tens or hundreds of thousands of members, enjoy funding and many privileges.

The number of members of the Union of Pro-Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations of Belarus fell from 700 in 2004 to the present 287 registered and unregistered organizations; still, the share of unregistered members has been rising since 2008 to reach the total of 60%.

According to the research in 446 organizations done in 2008–2009, unregistered organizations are most often involved in supporting national

culture, history, and sightseeing, education, self-organization of local communities and human rights protection.[5]

Over the years, the third sector has split into politicized organizations and those keeping aloof from politics; those that register and those that refuse to do it on principle; those that believe that cooperation with the authorities is attainable, and those that regard such cooperation as siding with the regime and firmly reject it. The latter suffer from the lack of stable funding and limited contact with the public opinion and target groups.

Nevertheless, the independent third sector can speak of unquestionable successes. Some subscribe to the opinion that their continuous existence is already a remarkable achievement. In the foreseeable future, this "keeping up of the fire" and constant challenging of the authorities in the who-is--more-clever type of competition will probably be the main pursuit of independent NGOs.

The third sector is also an advocate of new ideas and values. It has held several social campaigns that addressed vital social and political topics. These were, for example, apolitical campaigns that promoted social activity among the youth and were intended to improve the image of social organizations; campaigns for the use of the Belarusian language by GSM operators and private radio stations; the promotion of music bands singing in Belarusian. Other initiatives involved campaigning for an alternative military service, against death penalty, and some local and national campaigns opposing the construction of nuclear power plants in Belarus.

Independent non-governmental organizations also played a crucial role in the campaign aimed to encourage voting in the presidential elections with independent candidates in 2001 and 2006. They organized independent election monitoring in 2006, 2008, and 2010, the defence of Kuropaty, one of Stalin's crime sites, and protested against the "modernization" of the historic center of Grodno.

Considering the scarce forces and resources, and the competition of the pro-Russian state propaganda apparatus, the pro-democracy organizations and independent media have proved enormously successful in enhancing the status of the Belarusian language. The language was not lost; quite the contrary, it has become a mark of higher social status. From 2000 on,

5 *Bjelarusskij sjektor NGO: potjencial dlja pjerjemjen*. Minsk, 2009, p. 37, table 9.

businesses designing advertisements targeted at young people and the better-off have written their copies in the Belarusian language. From the language of uncultivated, backwater population, Belarusian has become the language of young people taking to the streets, independent culture designers, activists of pro-Western and nonconformist attitude, and the users of the Internet and new information technologies.[6]

The independent NGO community warmly welcomed the proposals contained in the Eastern Partnership program. The Belarusian Civil Society Forum was formed and, bringing together some sixty organizations, began heightened activity.[7] The representative of a Belarusian pro-democratic NGOs was elected president of the seventeen-member Steering Committee, set up at the first Civil Society Forum 2009 in Brussels. Currently, a Belarusian delegate is its vice-president.

EU and civil society in Belarus – the challenges

Upon the declaration of independence in 1991, Belarus quickly established relations with the EU. The new relations were rested on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and Tacis – a program aimed to support the countries of the former Soviet Union. Belarus promptly joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It was also granted special guest status in the Council of Europe. The signature of the PCA in 1995 was intended to foster closer cooperation.

Before long, the political situation in Belarus began to worsen. The first presidential election in 1994, won by an unknown representative of the Communist nomenklatura Alexander Lukashenko, was contested by the pro-democratic opposition and cast a chill over the relations between Minsk and Brussels. In 1995, Belarus was refused entry into the Council of Europe as full member on the grounds of undemocratic nature of the bygone parliamentary elections. Belarus's change of course towards the authoritarian regime eventuated in the freezing of the Partnership and Trade Agreement

6 See: Pejda, M. et. al. *Nadzieje. Złudzenia. Perspektywy. Społeczeństwo białoruskie 2007*. East European Democratic Centre Association: Warszawa-Minsk, 2007, p. 57.

7 Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, K. "Integracja czy imitacja? UE wobec wschodnich sąsiadów." *OSW* 36 (April 2011), Warszawa, p. 43.

already in 1996. The climax of the crisis came in 1997 when Belarus was deprived of the special guest status in the Council of Europe. In fact, the only platform of contact and dialogue left was the observation mission of the OSCE created in 1997. The framework of the EU's approach to Belarus was set, which, in principle, has been shaping the EU policy on Belarus to date.

Ever since, Lukashenko has repeatedly proved himself to be an unpredictable partner. The then EU policy instruments designed for the neighbouring states turned out totally ineffective in the case of Belarus. The prerequisite for their effectiveness was the intent of a neighbouring state to integrate with the EU and its preparedness to democratic and economic transformation. Initiated in 1991, the Tacis program quickly turned captive of the regime. The resources available under the program were to be expended only in agreement with the Belarusian authorities. Especially those earmarked for the opposition organizations, the media, and elites were strictly controlled.[8]

Belarus, seen in the EU as the last bastion of authoritarianism in Europe, for long remained an "awkward case" for Europe and did not seem to fit into any particular policy of the European Union. The EU enlargement in 2004 was a turnaround. Higher Belarusian officials who were linked to electoral fraud and quelled peaceful demonstrations were denied entry into the EU. Bilateral relations between the EU and Belarus were to remain chilled and distant. At the same time, the European Commission drew up a declaration of rapprochement with Belarus, yet contingent upon the positive feedback from the authorities in Minsk. The EU assistance was limited to humanitarian and regional projects and cross-border cooperation, and other initiatives designed to promote democratization explicitly or implicitly.[9] An important milestone was the decision to increase assistance to the development of civil society through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). It is a much more flexible instrument than Tacis. The relevant decisions on assistance are now hinged on Minsk's opinion. The latest stage in the Belarus-EU relations is the Eastern Partnership, Belarus being one of the six countries invited to the initiative.

8 Charman, K. "Belarus: The Foreign Aid Dilemma," in: *EU and Belarus: Between Moscow and Brussels*. The Federal Trust: London, 2002, pp. 387–406.

9 Vajnijenje, P., Krulikovskoj, E., Ploskonki, Ju., and V. Romanova eds. *Bjelarus' scjenarii rjeform*. Stefan Batory Foundation: Warsaw, 2003, pp. 105 and 110.

In order to be able to influence Belarus, Europe is compelled to face many challenges. First, it must find a way to reach the Belarusian registered and not registered entities with the resources that, by EU standards, are relatively sparse. It can be done through the EIDHR by, for example, increasing the pool of potentially distributable resources by the re-granting within a single project. It is also mandatory to reduce the required own contribution of Belarusian organizations to no more than 15% of the total project value.

At the end of the day, Europe will need a new instrument with simpler and more flexible rules; an instrument that would give the opportunity to aid societies, movements, and initiatives in countries reluctant or resistant to democratization and reforms, like Belarus; an instrument capable of securing a rapid assistance in circumstances as the revolutions unleashed in Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011.

The EU needs to map out a long-term and regular support for civil society and registered and unregistered organizations.

It is also necessary to ensure free movement of the widest possible group of the Belarusian citizens across the EU. The most cogent EU's gesture might be to abolish the visa regime unilaterally, while keeping the blacklist of Lukashenko's administration officials.

POLISH AID FOR BELARUS

The Polish Aid program is facing similar challenges as the EU's aid. The most burning issue is the provision of more flexible time frame for Polish Aid projects, abolish the requirement for their implementation and settlement within a calendar year, and, as in the case of the European Union's assistance, enable re-granting.

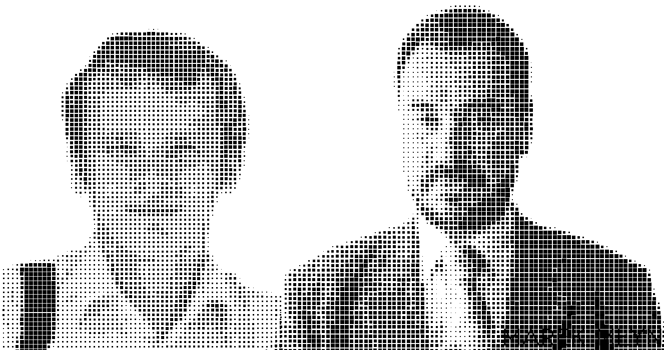
The action taken by the Polish authorities should respect the principles of cooperation worked out by the opposition political parties, independent media, and NGOs; Poland should attempt to talk about the scope and scale of the aid to Belarus with the representatives of all these stakeholders simultaneously, thus avoiding artificial divisions.

The substitution of the former Know How Foundation with a new entity, the International Solidarity Foundation, is the first step towards the idea of

the Polish Democracy Support Fund to materialize. It is positive that the implementation of the proposals submitted by the Polish pro-democracy organizations over a number of years has finally gained momentum. It is hoped that this foundation will build on the best European and American practices, and Poland will soon gain an efficient and competent agency, free of bureaucratic nonsense and capable of endorsing pro-market and pro-democratic changes in different parts of the world, especially in Belarus.

AGNIESZKA KOMOROWSKA

> The well-proven rule says that when on your way, always call at the crowded inns. The same is true about selecting a partner in the project. Especially a partner from the East.



MAREK MŁYNARCZYK, PAWEŁ PROKOP

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Non-governmental organizations in Eastern Europe are more frequently referred to as social organizations, thus borrowing from the Russian (*obshhestvennye organizacii*), but also English naming convention (civil society organizations), applied in the global donors' terminology (EuropeAid, UNDP, World Bank). By our standards, considering the situation of such organizations operating in the East, the term "social organizations" is much more in place than "NGOs." It is generally their character that argues for using the adjective "social." Not infrequently, they operate in a non-formal (e.g. lack of updated institutional documentation, no permanent seat), spontaneous (a project-to-project basis), and strictly social manner (sometimes in the event of discontinued funding over long periods, undertaken local projects ensure the continuity of operation). As a matter of fact, such communities are more focused on certain specific action than organized institutions obliged to perform certain tasks. In our opinion, the adjective "non-governmental" highlights more the institutional (related to the fact of

taking over certain public tasks) than social ("self-sufficiency" in the operation) nature of the organization; as regards organizations in the East, they predominantly reveal the social focus. Certainly, this is an ideal type, say, a model NGO; on the other hand, it goes without saying that social institutions become formalized as they grow.

THE BACKGROUND

One of the reasons for NGOs being more active in the social than non-governmental sphere is the low level of social participation in public life. A thing of the past in Poland, the bureaucratic model of administration still prevails in our Eastern partners. It manifests itself in a strictly hierarchical manner of management following rigid procedures. This model strives to maintain the status quo and fails to recognize the need to seek administration efficiency and relationship-building with citizens. Having a look at the global trends in the management of administration, there is a clear transition from the bureaucratic to the managerial model. Market relations grafted on to public institutions provide the needed benchmark. This leads to the managerial-like administration focused on change, innovation, creativity, efficiency, and effectiveness. This model is being slowly introduced in the administrations of the former USSR countries through the implementation of, for instance, modern systems of governance, all-embracing computerization, etc.

However, the essence of the modern state and civil society is the development of a participatory model of managing administration, where the key stimuli are not the procedures (bureaucratic model) or effects (managerial model), but the citizens' needs arising from shared social agreement. Not only does it involve a system of extensive consultation and agreements, but also delegation of tasks and, consequently, funds. In Western Europe, this model is already fully-fledged; Poland is laying its foundations; yet, in our Eastern partners, it does not often go beyond theory, its main implementation hindrance being *zakon* (the law).

The relationships between NGOs and state administration

Considering the existing bureaucratic-managerial model, many ideas and projects initiated by civil society organizations are in a fair way to completion only when they win the endorsement of the administration, or at least get their "green light." Taking the level of NGOs' interaction with the administration as a criterion, there are three types of organizations functioning in most post-Soviet countries:

a) Non-cooperating organizations – they are usually larger entities of long standing, involved in international networking, having independent sources of funding, and operating on an uninterrupted basis. Owing to their relatively impregnable position, they enjoy considerable autonomy in relation to the administration; what is more, the administration itself is reluctant to enter cooperation with them due to the type of activities they are into, e.g. the protection of human rights, monitoring public institutions, etc. Through their activities ("keeping an eye on the authorities"), such organizations are considered alien or even hostile entities by those wielding power. Their autonomy requires external sources of financing. On the other hand, there are organizations "excluded" by the administration in that they had been officially signed off and operate outside the mainstream of authorized social activity (no option of external financing; the Belarusian government regards unofficial organizations as illegal and anti-state).

b) Compromise organizations – smaller organizations without permanent and independent sources of funding or a broad network of partners. Their functioning is purely spontaneous; they experience alternate cycles of "hot periods" and "silly seasons," depending on their financial situation. Such organizations give outlet to their activity in many areas: from education and social aid to culture and tourism, etc. Their cooperation with the administration is necessitated by, first of all, the nature of their activity – some matters need to be settled at least without the administrative objection, and, secondly, by the requirement to maintain formal register. They often act as a peculiar catalyst for dealing with the administration. Other such organizations are of humanitarian nature – they would not be able to operate without cooperating with the administration.

c) Dependent organizations – such actors have no autonomy and work for the administration. They function in a rigid formal setting, on a permanent or temporary basis (depending on the needs of the administration). They do not usually initiate any projects but those commissioned by the authorities. They serve as the "social face" of the administration or often as "money machines" in raising external funds for state bodies and public institutions.

Grant programs and the situation of social organizations

By analyzing three grant programs promoting the cooperation with, for example, Belarus, namely: RITA – Region in Transition (non-governmental), Polish Aid (governmental) and European Territorial Cooperation Programme PL-BY-UA 2007–2013 (EU's), it must be noted that the program and its formal requirements determine the type of organization eligible for financing:

a) The RITA program is designed to support mostly the non-cooperating and compromise organizations. The program firmly emphasizes the priority of democratic change, including numerous ways to attain this objective, e.g. education and culture. An important element facilitating the acquisition of grants are fairly "liberal" formal requirements: a partner's letter at the application stage. This means that an organization is in a position to apply even if its current status is not set.
b) The Polish Aid program supports, like RITA, the non-cooperating and compromise organizations, but with an emphasis on actors that have been collaborating with Polish partners for many years (the collaboration record is of priority). The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs awards grants both for the activities involving the monitoring and control of Belarusian authorities (non-cooperating organizations) as well as for projects in social aid, entrepreneurship, or education, which may not be implemented in complete opposition to the government (compromise organizations). The formal requirements are also favorable, although not as much as in the case of the RITA program. It is worth noting that in the 2011 call for proposals no funding has been granted to projects directly intended for the administration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

should also be given extra credit for two this year's calls directly affecting Belarusian citizens, that is, Support for the Belarusian Society and Joint Polish-Belarusian Action 2011.

c) The European Territorial Cooperation Program PL-BY-UA 2007–2013 is primarily designed for dependent and compromise organizations. Due to its agenda and priorities (the focus on "hard" results), the gross majority of projects are intended for administration or public institutions closely working with dependent and compromise organizations. The formal requirements do not favor organizations which may face registration issues. A nuisance of the program is the "homogeneity" of its requirements for all territories covered without factoring in the non-standard and fluctuating conditions in countries such as Ukraine, let alone Belarus.

The functions of NGOs in post-Soviet societies

The peculiar state apparatus, a hybrid bureaucratic and managerial model, has created space for romantic, positivist, as well as opportunistic actors.

Non-cooperating organizations are the captains of democratic order and civil society. These actors display a high degree of credibility of their actions and have won trusted partners. If not for them, we would not have an idea of the actual social and economic situation in, for example, Belarus. Although they can be attributed certain insularity (which results from being stigmatized by the authorities), they accommodate the social needs (in the case of Belarus, it is particularly true after December 2010).

The other side of the coin is dependent organizations, whose only strong point is access (no influence) to state administration. In the case of action aimed directly at public institutions (e.g. good governance), such organizations may assume the role of social partners. Moreover, with the participation of a dependent organization in an undertaking, the administration may allow the involvement of one of compromise organizations.

In our opinion, cooperation with state administration should not be totally ruled out. We are far from believing in some remarkable bottom-up administrative transformation, but we do believe that to find common ground with the officials is by far achievable (though not easy). If we agree to work with teachers, doctors, social care personnel who are all part of the

state system, nothing should prevents us from taking joint action with local administration (e.g. in small towns) or dependent organizations.

It should be underlined that in our eastern neighbors (Ukraine, Belarus) it is of primary importance to implement projects (no matter the area) that will bring about the establishment of new ties, new community, a population conscious of their subjectivity.

This idea guides compromise organizations. They are exposed to the constant condition of a moral dilemma: do nothing (avoid registration), or do something, but within imposed limits which can occasionally be overstepped. Such organizations are aware that without the authorities' "go-ahead" many excellent ideas and concepts can be lost for good. Second, they are the pioneers of forging a compromise between the NGOs' aspirations and administrative omnipotence. When working with compromise organizations, we must be ready to let them determine the form and scope of action themselves, since they understand the local reality best and know exactly what can or cannot be done.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The practical question is how to make contact and start cooperation with partners from the East, e.g. Belarus. Their non-cooperating organizations already have trusted partners. By partnering up with dependent organizations, we risk losing control over the undertaking and using it for securing some "local interests." The most attractive partners, for those wishing to embark upon their „adventure with the East," including Belarus, are compromise organizations.

The existing system of partnership-making, e.g. through the database of organizations available at www.ngo.pl, www.ngo.ru, www.ngo.by, or the database of international projects implemented by Polish NGOs and prepared by Grupa Zagranica, or through partner exchanges organized during conferences and seminars, does not guarantee the best selection of the partner, let alone its viable vetting.

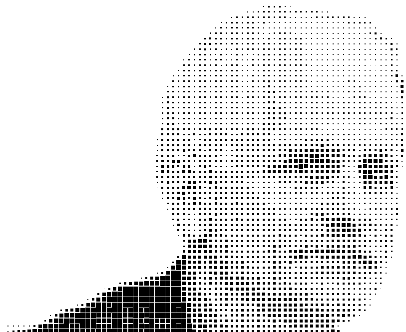
The well-proven rule says that when on your way, always call at the crowded inns. The same is true about selecting a partner in the project. Especially a partner from the East. It is most advisable to establish relationships

with those who are hard at work, which means they are verified by others. Of course, vigilance is always recommended. We have already dealt with well-organized and efficient partners who did not actually feel the "spirit of change" and decided to join the project only for pecuniary reasons.

Another problem that may surface when cooperating with an NGO partner is that it may seem to approach the project as an opportunity to secure its own interests. Finally, there are monopolistic partners who refuse other local institutions admission to cooperation. Obviously, the best choice is a solid, responsible, and tested partner, as the element of sustainability, cooperation, and loyalty is more than vital. If the partner is clearly inadequate and at the same time idle, it is mandatory to the benefit of the implemented actions to consider its replacement.

MAREK MŁYNARCZYK, PAWEŁ PROKOP

Despite the centuries-long discussion on rights in Belarus, the issue of personal freedom and the free thought still remains high on agenda. Belarusian human rights defenders continue to work in hostile and often dangerous conditions.



ALES' BIALATSKI

THE HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENSE IN BELARUS

Understanding human rights and the need to protect them has a very long history in Belarus. Human rights were first mentioned in the 18th-century manuscript by Siamion Zianovich *Sapraudnaja navuka asnou prava cauavieka u pryvatnasti i prava narodau uvohule*, in which he examined legal prerequisites for equality, discussed freedom and its qualities.

Jakub Jasinski, the leader of the 1793 uprising in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, significantly contributed to the political and social life of Belarus by formulating the demand to abolish monarchy and serfdom. On April 23, 1793, when an uprising broke out in Vilna (modern Vilnius), the Russian military garrison was seized. The following day, the Universal, proclaiming equality and ensuring personal freedom to peasants, was adopted. These ideas of human equality, personal freedom, and inalienability of human rights dominated during all successive rebellions against Russian despotism in the following century.

After the 1917 October Revolution, it became virtually impossible to promote and defend political and civil rights in Soviet Belarus. The dictatorship of the proletariat as well as Stalin's mass repressions forced Belarusians

to struggle primarily for their own survival rather than fight for their rights. After World War II, the issue became even more salient. At the same time, right after the war, youth underground associations started to emerge (mostly in Western Belarus). The Union of Liberation of Belarus, the The Union of Belarusian Patriots, Chajka, Free Belarus and others aimed at reaching Belarus' independence and the restoration of civil, political, and social rights of Belarusians. All those organizations were discovered by the KGB. Their members were repressed or even executed.

The death of Stalin inspired a new wave of Belarusians' struggle for human rights. More than a hundred people were convicted of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation in Belarus during 1953–1985. Belarusians protested against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The journalist and historian Anatol Sidarevich, the poet Fiodar Yafimau, activists Mikalai Yakimovich and Mikalai Kukabaka were convicted of anti-Soviet sentiments. Mikalai Kukabaka, actually, was one of the best known Belarusian dissidents. He was arrested many times, forcedly placed in a psychiatric clinic, and later convicted of "slander of the Soviet state and social system" for his human rights activities that included writing critical articles and spreading copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Still, a popular dissident movement never emerged in Belarus. Dissidents mostly targeted the policy of Russification led by the communists; they concentrated on semi-legal educational activities. For instance, Bely brothers spread anti-Soviet leaflets in Minsk in the '50s-70s and got a long prison term when they were caught. Kim Hadzieyeu, a philosopher and culture expert who was leading a philosophical and literary circle at the Belarusian State University, was repressed as well. The painter Liavon Barazna, who was the leader of a non-conformist artistic movement and actively protested against the destruction of old Minsk buildings, was murdered in 1972 in mysterious circumstances. Yakau Heyfitz was one of Jewish activists; he was convicted for his criticism of the government's policy on cultural rights of the Jewish minority in Belarus.

Fight for independence in the early '80s

A new youth democratic movement emerged in Belarus in the early '80s. It resorted to both legal and illegal actions. Being inspired by the events in Poland, Belarusian youngsters started their fight for national, political, civil, and social rights of the Belarusian people.

On December 16–17, 1987, the First Free Meeting of Belarusian Youth Communities took place in Minsk, attracting several dozens of the so-called "informal associations." They adopted a number of documents, which declared their will to fight for the rule of law and for ensuring all civil and political freedoms and independent judiciary, to control the activities of the KGB, and to ensure fair justice of the judiciary. The year of 1988, when the truth about the mass grave of Stalin's repressions victims in Kurapaty (near Minsk) was revealed, became a reference point for Belarusian human rights defenders. The Committee-58 was created to "remind about the relevant article of the RSFSR's Penal Code that led to the unjust conviction of millions all across the USSR." Committee-58 served as a basis for the Martyrology of Belarus Society in the memory of Stalin's repressions victims, which became the first officially registered human rights association in Belarus.

Fighting Stalin's legacy was crucial for democratic changes in Belarusian society. The first mass protests in Belarus, including Dziady-87, the demonstration and rally at Kurapaty on June 19, 1988, as well as Dziady-88 rally on October 30, 1988, were distinguished by their anti-Stalinist, anti-totalitarian philosophy. Therefore, the Soviet Belarusian authorities brutally dispersed Dziady-88. However, the repressions did not bring the expected result. The society reacted to them with a huge wave of condemnation and indignation. Thousands of Belarusians joined the newly created Belarusian Popular Front. BPF was the first mass democratic social and political organization that aimed at bringing scaling transformations to Belarusian society and later fought for those transformations using political and civil means. Among the main issues raised by the Belarusian Popular Front were: state independence, multi-party system, freedom of information, freedom of consciousness, environmental issues, free and fair elections, economic reforms, human rights, etc. BPF, which became the main political and civil force in the late '80s – early '90s, brought independence to Belarus in 1991.

In 1990, the Vienna Committee was set up in Belarus. According to one of its founders, Valery Siadou, the Committee "emerged as a reverse reaction against mass terror applied by the Communist regime against BPF members and all other dissidents." The members of Vienna Committee provided legal support to victims of repressions, voiced human rights ideas at protest actions and in the free press, participated in international human rights conferences in Moscow and in the conferences of oppressed people in Tallinn and Tbilisi. On December 10, 1990, the meeting in Minsk, organized by the Committee to celebrate the Human Rights Day, attracted several thousand people. Siadou himself participated in an anti-communist demonstration that took place on November 7, 1990 in the center of Minsk, and brought to the statue of Lenin the so-called "gift": a cross "dressed" in inmate clothes and wrapped into barbed wire. On May 7, 1991, according to the BSSR Prosecutor's Office decision, Siadou was arrested and placed in a detention center. He spent there more than two months, including one month on a hunger strike. Soon the activities of Vienna Committee were over.

The Belarusian PEN Center (its first director was Carlos Sherman) was created in November, 1989. The center was engaged in freedom of expression and human rights defense. Since 1994, the Belarusian PEN Center annually awards two literary prizes to writers who spread the ideas of open society. In 1996, the Belarusian PEN Center became member of the Writers in Prison Committee, set up by the Assembly of the Delegates of the International PEN Club in 1960. Members of the Belarusian PEN Center were often repressed for their civic position. The Belarusian writer and former director of the Belarusian PEN Center Uladzimer Niakliaeu was heavily beaten and arrested by the KGB when he was still a presidential candidate in 2010; later he was convicted. The PEN Center advocates the interests of repressed Belarusian writers.

The Belarusian League of Human Rights was founded in 1992. It was headed by Yauhen Novikau, a Member of Parliament. Initially, BLHR actively engaged in human rights protection, helping victims of the Belarusian government's repressions and publishing the *Human Rights* newspaper. Activists of the League researched the cases of political abuse of psychiatry to persecute dissidents in Belarus. In 1995, Novikau became a turncoat and was removed from the management of BLHR. By 2000, BLHR became non-existent.

MID-'90S: A NEW PAGE IN BELARUS' HUMAN RIGHTS HISTORY

After Alexander Lukashenko came to power, the human rights situation in Belarus heavily deteriorated. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) emerged as a reaction to the first limitations on freedom of information. Its main goal is "to create conditions for freedom of expression and information, guaranteeing the right to the free flow of information."

Another response to the attack on political and civil liberties was the foundation of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) on November 1, 1995. Its honorary chairman was the world-famous Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau. The desecration of the national white-red-white flag by Belarusian highest officials triggered the creation of BHC. The Committee has branches and 350 members in twelve Belarusian cities. In 1998, it received an award from the US and the EU. BHC monitors cases of human rights violations and provides legal support to people (it reviews up to 2,000 complaints per annum). The Committee organizes human rights trainings and educational programs for young activists and lawyers, publishes specialized rights-related literature, and organizes events to attract attention to human rights violations in Belarus. The organization is a partner of the Council of Europe and a participant of the international Helsinki movement. It is headed by Aleh Hulak.

The support group for political repressions victims was organized in the spring of 1996 as a response to the brutal dispersal of Chernobyl March manifestation, when around two hundred people were arrested, with organizers subjected to criminal prosecution. Later, it transformed into the Human Rights Center "Viasna" (chaired by Ales' Bialatski). The Center has branches in seventeen Belarusian cities. It actively supports victims of political repressions, gathers and distributes information on human rights violations in Belarus and abroad, organizes educational human rights programs and election observation. In 2003, the Supreme Court of Belarus canceled the registration license of HRC "Viasna" following a lawsuit from the Ministry of Justice. In 2007, the UN Human Rights Committee concluded that "Viasna's" dissolution amounted to a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 22) and called for re-registration of the affected organization. The Belarusian government, however, did not comply with

that recommendation. On March 6, 2004, HRC "Viasna" became member of the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH). In 2008, Bialatski was elected vice-president of FIDH. The achievements of the Center were recognized by international awards in Czech Republic, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the United States.

In the late '90s – early '00s, other national and regional human rights NGOs emerged, including the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs of Belarus and the Independent Society of Legal Research. Destroyed by the authorities in 2003, the latter was transformed into the Center for Legal Transformation and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development, which followed up with human rights actions. The Legal Assistance to the Population initiative, led by Aleh Volchak since 1998, focuses on the investigation of politically motivated kidnappings that took place in Belarus in 1999–2000.

Since 1998, the Mahiliou Human Rights Center, led by Uladzimer Krauchanka, monitors the human rights situation in the regions. It gathers and spreads information on human rights violations, organizes educational human rights actions.

Since the beginning of the '00s, several other organizations have emerged in the field of human rights defense in Belarus. The Minsk Center for Human Rights and Legal Initiative deal with human rights trainings. Human Rights Alliance assists victims of political repressions and their families and spreads information about human rights violations. In 2006, after mass repressions during and after the presidential election, the Committee for the Defense of the Repressed "Salidarnasc" was founded. Led by Ina Kuley, the Committee pays special attention to persecuted students and the families of repressed activists. It provides medical and psychological assistance to the victims of political repressions.

Since 2007, the Human Rights House works in exile in Vilnius as a joint human rights initiative of several organizations. Being a big educational human rights center and an open democratic environment, it aims at helping Belarusian NGOs. The House organizes Belarusian human rights educational programs, supports international cooperation of human rights organizations, and serves as a platform for trainings, meetings, and cultural actions that are difficult to implement in Belarus.

The association of relatives of political prisoners Committee Liberation was founded after the events of December 19, 2010. The Committee supports political prisoners and their families, if the latter are in need.

Due to unfavorable conditions for human rights activities in Belarus, local human rights associations join their forces. The Forum of Belarusian Human Rights Defenders took place in Minsk in 2004 and in Vilnius on September 25–26, 2010. The participants discussed possible solutions that would enable them to improve the quality of human rights work. During the 2nd Forum, representatives of eighteen Belarusian human rights organizations agreed to draft a joint strategy for the development of the local human rights movement.

Throughout all those years, several joint human rights campaigns, dedicated to the most acute human rights issues in Belarus, were organized. For instance, the NGO Assembly launched the "Stop 193.1" campaign, aimed at removing from the Penal Code criminal prosecution for activities staged on behalf of an unregistered organization. The campaign took place in 2009–2010. "Human Rights Defenders against Death Penalty" is the title of yet another campaign organized jointly by HRC "Viasna" and BHC in 2009. The Center for Legal Transformation and HRC "Viasna" launched a campaign for alternative service. In 2008 and 2010, during parliamentary and presidential elections, HRC "Viasna" and BHC coordinated the campaign called "Human Rights Defenders for Free and Fair Elections." Joint efforts of human rights organization brought to life alternative UPR reports for the UN in 2009–2010. The NGO Assembly, HRC "Viasna," BAJ, and BHC contributed to those reports. NGOs coordinate their activities in the civic dimension of Eastern Partnership, active since 2009.

The developments of the presidential campaign and the Election Day of December 19, 2010 became a challenge to the Belarusian human rights community. Belarusian human rights defenders attempt to support victims of political repressions, using both internal and international means and practices. A constant flow of aid was sent to political prisoners and families of repressed activists. In 2011, human rights defenders informed the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the European Union about the real condition of political prisoners as well as the scale of repressions that affected hundreds of Belarusians. Belarusian human rights defenders strongly condemned repressions applied by the authorities against their

political opponents. Human rights activists from Belarus work closely with foreign partners.

The reaction of the government to the informed criticism was nervous. The KGB raided the offices of leading human rights NGOs and private apartments of human rights defenders, confiscating their computers. HRC "Viasna's" chairman Ales' Bialatski received a warning, issued by the office of the Prosecutor General, for acting by the name of an unregistered organization. BHC received two warnings from the Ministry of Justice. State media lead an unremitting campaign of defamation and discreditation of Belarusian human rights activists, calling them "the fifth column" and "the enemies of the people."

However, being fully aware of their great responsibility to the Belarusian people and to those who are in need in human rights defense, Belarusian human rights organizations continue to work and get constant and strong support from Belarusians.

ALES' BIALATSKI

Editorial note: *Several days after writing this article, Ales' Bialatski was arrested. The European community and human rights defenders from all over the world regard this move of the Belarusian authorities as lynching and revenge for his longstanding human rights activity and as an attempt to destroy the Human Rights Center 'Viasna' and intimidate the whole human rights movement of Belarus; reprisals and revenge for his human rights activities of many years, as well as the desire to destroy 'Viasna' Human Rights Center and intimidate the Belarusian human rights movement as a whole.*

With history textbooks re-written, national language being destroyed and ideology returning to schools, setback is the best word to describe all the changes that have taken place in the Belarusian education system during the last ten years.



TAMARA MATSKEVICH

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE RETURN OF BELARUS TO EUROPEAN CULTURAL SPACE

Belarus has difficulties in building a democratic state, based on the rule of law and incorporated into the global economic and cultural context, because its system of education is yet to accomplish its socio-cultural mission of forming a free democratic European nation.

Education in the former USSR served the interests of the defense establishment. Mathematics and natural sciences were taught properly at schools, while the role of humanitarian education was purposefully diminished. Civic education was not envisaged at all; it was totally replaced by propaganda.

After the breakup of the communist bloc, all liberated states launched educational reforms, as the changing political system required new personal qualities from people. Belarus was not an exception. The Concept of the National School of Belarus was written in 1993 but was not adopted by force of circumstances. New Soviet ideology-free textbooks on history and social sciences were published. However, after 1996, the educational reform was wound up.

THE CURRENT STATE OF BELARUSIAN EDUCATION

The government order for education has changed since the beginning of the '90s. With history textbooks re-written, national language being destroyed and the ideology course (the dictators' favorite tool) returning to schools, setback is the best word to describe all the changes that have taken place in the Belarusian education system during the last ten years.

National self-identification is hindered by the official approach, which promotes Belarus as the USSR preserved in its best incarnation and Belarusians as the best of the Soviet people.

The 2008 educational reform pushed us away from the modern educational process even further. The poorly thought-out reform was carried out in a hurry. The No. 15 Decree On Certain Issues of General Secondary Education was signed on July 17, 2008. Already on September 1, 2008, Belarusian schools had to begin a new academic year with new curricula. It is revealing that the reform was authored by the Presidential Administration, not the Ministry of Education, and was announced by the then country's chief ideologist Anatol Rubinau.

As a result of the 2008 reform, the innovations of the '90s that aimed at unification of Belarusian education system with modern European standards were revoked. The 12-year secondary school was liquidated. The number of academic hours was reduced for all disciplines, especially for foreign languages, literature, humanities – the subjects that shape the world view of students. The History of Belarus and the Modern Arts courses were removed from the school curriculum. The ideological censorship erased the names of many prominent Belarusian historical figures and writers from history and literature textbooks. The interpretation of the Soviet era became almost identical to the one in Soviet textbooks.

The reform abolished specialized courses at schools that envisaged an in-depth study of disciplines. Eventually, all schools follow the same curriculum, adjusted to students of average and below the average level. Lessons for advanced students are transformed into non-obligatory electives that take place in extracurricular hours. Some gymnasiums and high schools continue to offer high quality education, but their standards are gradually deteriorating as well.

The 2008 reform consolidated the state monopoly over the secondary school, lowered the overall level of education, and replaced the civic education with pseudo-patriotism and teachings on the advantages of the Belarusian development model. It was not accidental that the reform was rushed. The ideology course, introduced into the school curriculum in 2003, had not fulfilled its mission. So, the whole educational system was rebuilt to serve the interests of ideology, that is, to bring up inert, obedient people who blindly support the government's course. Consequently, instead of education, schools exercise thought control aiming to subdue the energy of new generations. A woman from the district department of education in Orsha once said: "Our schools belong to the state. It means the head of state rules there. If he makes a decision, so shall be it."

Still, education is an asset for the overwhelming majority of Belarusians. Belarusians have always indigenously aspired to educate their children. When they did not have enough means, the whole family, including distant relatives, would contribute to support at least one child "to get on in the world." Well-to-do peasants built schools or hired the so-called "directors": private tutors who walked from house to house, teaching children how to read and write.

This tradition is actually reviving in the current conditions. The overall level of school education is so low that teachers who are able to instruct and parents who are interested in educating their children are forced to create alternative, independent of state educational communities. The educational function gradually shifts into the area of informal education.

The most popular forms of informal education include courses and private tutoring. They have different levels of legalization, but all of them are working to fulfill very narrow tasks and are not trying to foster students or socialize them. NGOs continue to do a lot for education, even though the state makes it really difficult for them to operate.

The few private secondary schools and universities are not active enough; they are gradually forced out of the educational services market. "Underground schools" are not numerous, either. They cannot openly advertise their entrance campaigns, remaining under the risk of repressions. On the other hand, schools such as the Belarusian Humanities Lyceum set an example of educational self-organization that can exist even in the conditions of dictatorship.

BELARUSIANS A HURDLE FOR BELARUSIAN STATE

The role of education in the return of Belarus to European cultural space

Every state creates an educational system that is relevant to its political rule. The Belarusian regime does not want Belarusians to learn their national identity and traditional values, because if they do, they will realize that the overwhelming majority of Belarusians belong to the Western civilization. Since they possess European mentality and support relevant values, democracy should then become their civilizational choice.

In the current conditions, Belarusian authorities can more easily manipulate the mass consciousness. With the help of ideology and propaganda, they can impose collectivism, "strong power," sacrifice for the sake of stability and order – the ideals alien to Belarusians. They can persuade Belarusians that their country is on the crossroads between the West and the East, and invent all sorts of "elder brothers" and "potential enemies." In other words, Belarusians continue to remain as a hurdle for the Belarusian state.

This position of the authorities is easy to understand. In the Belarusian political, social and cultural situation, national values are perceived as closely related to the democratic viewpoint and civic activeness. This is exactly what the current Belarusian regime does not want.

Education in the Belarusian language is provided on reservations. The situation continues to deteriorate – only around 2% of school students in the capital study in Belarusian. It is even worse in the regions. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to create a Belarusian-speaking class.

On the other hand, home schooling, distant and non-formal education continue to develop. Some children who attend "regular" schools increasingly get "parallel" education. This kind of education is very different and includes education in the Belarusian language. In fact, being a Belarusian is trendy among youths.

The government, however, is not yet satisfied with the state of affairs. Therefore, the Educational Code that enters into force on September 1, 2011, envisages a stricter control of the state over all forms of education.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Not only pro-democracy forces understand the importance of teachers for the future of the country. The authorities regard teachers as a factor of influence on young generations and as a potential for bolstering the existing regime. It was hardly accidental that Education Minister Alexander Radzkou was appointed head of Alexander Lukashenko's nomination group during the presidential elections and later promoted to the presidential administration. Currently, the official position of the Belarusian government in the field of education is based on the policy which views school as platform for fostering non-demanding citizens who easily follow orders and build their lives on the Soviet values adapted to Belarusian realities.

To reach this goal, the government strictly limits teacher's freedom, using short-term labor contracts, bureaucratic mechanisms, detailed plans and manuals. Obedient teachers get privileges and promotion. Besides, to keep the protest sentiments and social activity of teachers asleep, the state turns a blind eye to the shadow business of tutoring that helps teachers get additional unreported income. However, this works out only as long as a teacher is obedient. In 2010, for instance, the teachers who sought to run for seats in the local councils, received threats. Authorities warned they would start criminal cases against them for their illegal income from private lessons.

Recently, not only teachers, but also students of schools and universities have been repressed for their democratic views. The government utilizes economic measures, army conscription and healthcare system to suppress them, often in violation of laws.

The new Educational Code envisages new possibilities for removing both unwanted teachers and students (!) from the system of education.

The role of teachers is of paramount importance to civil-society building. Our common goal is not to lose our young generation, so as to give the democracy in Belarus positive prospects. Teachers are faced with a tough task. It is getting more and more difficult to explain democratic values to young people. **For them, it is just an abstract concept**. It is impossible to tell someone about the taste of the food which he or she has never tried. In the same way, youngsters grown up under anti-democratic rule do not realize what freedom, choice or respect to the viewpoint of another person

mean. If they do not understand or accept those values, how can they understand what they should aspire for?

TOUGH CHOICE FOR BELARUSIAN TEACHERS

Belarusian teachers can now choose from three models of behavior. If one does nothing, the ideological propaganda will totally discredit "patriotism," "democracy," "Europe," "freedom," imposing paternalism, xenophobia and conformism as a norm. Then, quite soon, young Belarusians will not laugh at the main idea of the "scientific communism," which states that "the dictatorship of the proletariat is the highest form of democracy."

If one promotes long-term democratic education, the risk emerges of transforming democracy into a game where rules are impractical and applicable only in a limited space.

The third way is the hardest. Teachers should re-evaluate their function. They need to start defending actively their professional and civic positions as well as the need to build democracy, starting today by means of education. This requires a lot of effort. Teachers should find new methods that would demonstrate the advantages of democracy to the young generation. They have to do it in a country where ideology cannot replace civic education, while civic education is not in demand, because it is designed for a democratic society. Teachers should create conditions in which children would be able to learn values of advanced societies, even though they are proposed to use advertising slogans such as "For blossoming Belarus!" instead. Belarusian teachers should do it on their own, since they have no one to advise them. Belarus is the last dictatorship in Europe. Our European neighbors often do not understand that dictatorship that exists in the informational society applies new and more sophisticated techniques of ideological propaganda and repressions. Fighting dictatorship nowadays is much more difficult than in the times of the Solidarity movement in Poland or even during recent "color revolutions."

At the same time, the third way is the easiest one: staying true to oneself and fulfilling one's mission. Many Belarusian teachers are choosing this way.

Non-government organizations that organize methodical and civic education for teachers help them fulfill their mission by providing them

with necessary tools. They suggest different programs and internships. They translate materials used by teachers in democratic countries. To avoid re-inventing the wheel, we can use some of their experience that we like or consider useful; still, we will have to do many things on our own.

Belarusian methodology specialists and other pedagogic experts who propose teaching methods borrowed mostly from our Eastern neighbors fail to realize that the overwhelming majority of Belarusians, although often unaware of it, have a Western (European) mentality. Whatever they say, Belarusians as well as Germans, Czechs or Latvians, value a human being much higher than his or her status, position, shoulder straps, awards or any other insignia. This is the so-called medical evidence of the Western civilization's psychology. Any traveler to Asian countries and Russia, especially its remote parts, will confirm that the situation is totally different there. This might be the reason why innovative and person-centered education methods struggle to get adapted in Russia – they were invented by Europeans for the Western-European civilizational values.

The renowned psychologist and educationalist Lev Vygotsky, born in the Belarusian city of Orsha, proposed a cultural and historical theory that gave birth to the biggest school in Soviet psychology. Alexey Leontiev, Alexander Luria, Alexander Zaparozhets, Lydia Bozhovich, Petr Galperin, Dmitry El'konin, Vladimir Zinchenko, Leonid Zankov, and others all came from that school. In the '70s, Vygotsky's theories attracted the attention of American psychologists. In the next decade, all his works were translated into English and became, together with Jean Piaget's research, the basis for the modern U.S. educational psychology. At the same moment, Russians and Belarusians who followed their footsteps quickly wound up the developmental education based on Elkonin-Davydov's system. The Soviet educational system, able to produce soldiers at best, was promoted again.

Belarusian teachers as well as Belarusians themselves should free themselves from the impact of the Russianized informational environment, adopt a broader perspective and find their own place in the multicultural world while staying true to their own values.

GENERATION Y VS GENERATION LU

Any education has three components: knowledge, civic competences (i.e. skills and conscious willingness to use that knowledge) and values. If any of these components is left out, the construction is not solid.

Isolated from European study curricula, Belarusian education is not within the framework of the European criteria which set the standards of European education. Belarus is not included into the international program of the evaluation of educational achievements of students (PISA) which provides the world's most comprehensive and strictly-followed set of international standards in the field of secondary school students' knowledge and skills assessment. Belarus has not joined the Bologna process allows students and university professors to share educational experience. The majority of Belarusian professors have never heard of key competences recommended as a criterion of evaluation of the quality of education by the European Parliament or the Council of Europe since December 18, 2006.

Belarusian education develops blindly. Consequently, the whole generation is brought up by Lukashenko's regime; this generation receives the education that is not aimed at personal fulfillment in the society.

Representatives of this generation differ from their peers from all over the world. They do not know the value of time, are not result-oriented and take more time than others to prepare for the entrance into the adult world. According to the survey by axiometrical laboratory NOVAK, only a part of Belarusian youngsters rely on themselves and link their success with their personal efforts; the other part, around 30%, relies on the state. However, the negative trend for the state is that around 40% of youngsters want to emigrate. Besides, young Belarusians possess noticeable traces of the Soviet mentality. The West finds hope in Generation Y, while we regard it as a lost one.

CONCLUSIONS

Belarus is part of Europe geographically, historically and culturally. However, it is artificially removed from European processes. To bring Belarus back into the European cultural environment, the educational system should

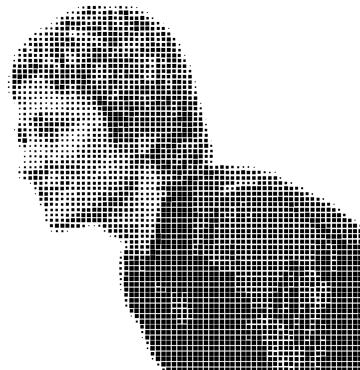
aim at building a modern Belarusian nation that will become the basis of the construction of the European state. Without reaching this goal it will be difficult for Belarus to integrate into the modern European educational and cultural space where post-national societies solve problems on a new level.

Another equally important task is to foster active responsible citizens who are able to act on all levels of a democratic society. This is a more complicated task as it requires the consolidation of the intellectual forces of Belarus in order to convey an unambiguous message on how to teach democracy in the society with no demand for this knowledge and where the desire for self-responsibility runs into conflict with the paternalist policy of the state. Secondly, this implies the creation of the conditions for practical application of the skills and knowledge of a democratic society.

TAMARA MATSKEVICH

NGO INTERVIEWS

Intellectuals in Belarus view their country as an integral part of Europe in the context wider than geography, promoting the socio-cultural values of the "European way."



IS A BELARUSIAN A EUROPEAN?

OLGA SHPARAGA – INTERVIEW

The Center for European Studies (CfES) is a Belarusian independent organization that developed in 2010 from the *Novaya Europa* web magazine. It brings together researchers and experts who support the idea of the "European choice" for Belarus. The Center deals with European affairs and implements projects in two main spheres. First of all, it studies the European dimension in Belarusian society and preconditions for Belarus's Europeanization. In addition to that, the Center's research in the sphere of politics, economy, education, history, and culture is aimed at educating Belarusians about the current European developments. To learn more about the Center's activities as well as about the political and cultural situation in Belarus and challenges for its civil society, we talk to Olga Shparaga, PhD, an associate professor at the European Humanities University, *Novaya Europa's* editor and one of CfES experts.

Tatyana Artimovich: Olga, the key idea of the Center for European Studies is the "idea of Europe." How would you interpret this idea?

Olga Shparaga: The idea of Europe is one of the most discussed issues in the European community. Before the EU enlargement, this idea had a different connotation, meaning, first of all, democratic transition. When the EU embraced new members from Central and Eastern Europe, the idea of Europe gained more complex interpretations that included values and contradictions of the Communist and Soviet past, the history of each particular country that in its turn had more ethnical, political, and cultural contradictions. I support researchers with the value-centric take on Europe, that, on the one hand, describes basic political values, such as freedoms and human rights, but on the other, suggests a unique take on those values by particular countries, depending on their history and culture.

The issue of identity is relevant to the whole European community as well. One has to decide if the European identity as such is achievable and whether it is possible to discuss any common values in the European context. One more important topic is the culture of memory, since each European region has its complicated historical narrative that has to be somehow integrated into the European community, taking into account each region's history, contradictions, and complications. The idea of Europe works in this context for Belarus as a reference point that shows options of alternative development. Dialogue plays an important role in this process, since the assessment by the outside world is the best way of understanding the value of one's actions. I believe that the rest of Europeans can assist Belarusians in the evaluation of our present and past. Our history is built on contradictions between the Soviet and European past, between different educational systems, economical viewpoints, and cultural environments. The European way puts those different values in accordance. Our Center aims at promoting the European idea in an academic environment to assist Belarus in setting up a school of European research.

T.A.: Tell us about the Center's experts.

O.Sh.: They are basically the members of the initial team of the *Novaya Europa* magazine. The philosopher Alexander Adamyants is the editor-in-chief. He

is joined by the historian Alexey Bratochkin, the political scientist Pavel Usov and the political analyst Andrei Fedorov. At the very beginning, when we were working on our first monograph, *The Ways of Europeanization of Belarus: Between Politics and Identity Construction*, we asked the department of political sciences of the European Humanities University for some help. Its European studies professor Anatoliy Kruglashov recommended two recent graduates, Alexander Vlaskin and Yuliya Kotskaya, and they became part of our research team. Generally speaking, one of our tasks is to serve as an integrating platform for young researchers of European studies who received their education abroad.

T.A.: Was the monograph *The Ways of Europeanization of Belarus: Between Politics and Identity Construction* the first result of the Center's activities?

O.Sh.: Not really. Our very first publication was the *Glossary of the EU and the Eastern Partnership* which had no previous equivalent in the Russian or Belarusian languages. We translated articles from English and complemented them with original texts written by our experts and describing Belarusian realities, such the history of Belarus-Europe relations since 1989, the Eastern Partnership policy, and some other issues relevant to the Belarusian context. *The Ways of Europeanization of Belarus* was published a year later. What I would like to emphasize is that round tables and discussions, led by *Novaya Europa* for many years, played a crucial role in the emergence of the Center. The transcripts of those discussions are available on our web page.

T.A.: How would you estimate the level of contribution of your theoretical research into the modernization of Belarus, into changes in the society?

O.Sh.: We used the research of Stefan Garsztecki from Germany as the basis for two definitions in *The Ways of Europeanization of Belarus* monograph: "top-down" and "down-top" Europeanization. A "top-down" Europeanization is also called "political" and means, first of all, the synchronization of national legislative framework with the EU norms, followed by institutional transformation. A strong political will is required to put those legislative and regulatory reforms into practice. There are no conditions for this type of Europeanization in modern Belarus yet. Therefore, we pay more attention




to a "down-top" Europeanization in the book. We try to show the possibilities for "down-top" Europeanization in current conditions. Intellectuals can choose whether they support principles of publicity and autonomy that are more natural for Europe, or closeness and paternalism that are alien to the European set of values, in the process of community formation, in the selection of topics and methods of research.

T.A.: Does the Center have any contacts with state institutions?

O.Sh.: We send out our publications to all libraries. Our *Glossary of the EU* was specifically requested by the National Library. This is the only interaction we have had so far.

T.A.: Could you tell us more about *Novaya Europa* that served as the basis for the Center? What is it about, who are the authors, what are the goals of this publication?

O.Sh.: *Novaya Europa* was founded in 2006 under some influence of the presidential election that took place in the same year. However, the election was not the only prerequisite for this new enterprise. Before starting up with this publication, our team had ran *Belintellectuals*, a small web community of Belarusian intellectuals, learning how to deliver social and humanitarian knowledge, available in the independent Belarusian community, to a wider audience. *Belintellectuals* is still active, but now publishes more serious, more intellectual texts. The idea of *Novaya Europa* is to develop an intellectual approach in journalism, to write about issues relevant to Belarusian society, culture, politics, public space; to put a spotlight on the problems of various social groups and gender issues. We both reconstruct the experience of

the last twenty years and take a look at Belarusian society and culture from new angles, following the latest trends in social and humanitarian research. Our Soviet past is an important segment of our work, since Belarus lacks academic research and publications on its recent history. Everything seems to start from scratch, with no one remembering the events that took place five or ten years ago. Memory is very important, since the culture of memory is crucial for the construction of a European identity.

T.A.: *Novaya Europa* differs from other independent media by presenting on its pages diverse opinions that, in the end, create an objective picture.

O.Sh.: As I have already mentioned, everything we do is based on dialogue. We understand objectivity as a dialogue of people with different positions. Still, I can't imagine us publishing articles written by state ideologists. The "official" Belarus does not recognize equality or mutuality, i.e. we know that state media will never try to present an opinion of an independent expert or academic in an objective way. While this status quo exists, it is not possible to host those people on our independent platform. We invite everyone else, though. While the editorial office may not necessarily share some author's opinion, our mission is to present the diversity of Belarus via the diversity of opinions. Diversity exists even in *independent* Belarus, only seemingly homogenous in its criticism of Lukashenko. Like other platforms, we attempt to balance criticism with positive reviews, trying to show another Belarus, other values, different views on the present and the past. We aim at articulating this diverse Belarus, free from state-imposed ideology.

T.A.: As a professor of the European Humanities University, can you tell us how its educational approach differs from the one applied in Belarusian universities?

O.Sh.: The first difference is in the form, not in content. Since its first days, EHU has been trying to shake the vertical structure of teacher-student relations, inherited from the Soviet educational system. The teacher-student

relations in EHU are horizontal, since both sides are participants of the same process. Professors engage students into research, inspiring them to participate on equal terms. Since professors are more knowledgeable, they naturally share their expertise with students. Still, their main task is to teach students learning techniques. The second distinguishing feature relates to content. At EHU, there is no ideological rule over the educational system. Every professor is free to select methods or research tools. They present their choice, defend it, compare it to other theories, and inspire students to act in the same way. As a result, EHU students learn different theories, methods, and decide whether to choose one of them or combine them in their own research.

T.A.: In your opinion, why Belarusian educational institutions do not capitalize on the undeniable achievements of EHU?

O.Sh.: The reform of teacher-student relations is possible only as part of the overall democratization of education. Students who feel equal to professors are likely to defend their own rights. In an ideal world, this should develop their active civil position. An ideologically controlled system of education sees that as a challenge. As for the content, all specializations and methods developed in EHU are based on critical thinking. Belarusian social and humanitarian scientists, on the other hand, still live in the world of "the one and only" philosophy, "the one and only" ideology or economy that are closed to criticism or change. How could any openness be possible in this environment? An essential part of our approach is the transformation of critical thinking into the critical perception of reality. The Belarusian system of education doesn't want this criticism. As in Soviet times, it serves the needs of the state apparatuses and is designed to churn out graduates who will not be competitive outside Belarus. Those graduates have little or no knowledge of alternative models of social, political, or cultural development and, therefore, cannot touch base with their counterparts abroad. In this way, the Belarusian political regime ensures its stability. Being poorly educated, Belarusian humanities researchers are doomed to be unwanted abroad and continue reproducing the old system. One should admit that due to globalization Belarusian system is less closed than it was before. Some young people, as well as professors, realize the disadvantages that are

brought by the old system, and get their knowledge about other models of social, political, or cultural development from the Web. They have to process that kind of knowledge on their own.

T.A.: In your book *Awakening Political Life: An Essay on the Philosophy of the Public* you describe two key moments that influenced your civic position. The first one was in 2004, when EHU was shut down in Minsk. The second was during the presidential election of 2006. For many founding fathers of the Belarusian "renaissance" of the '90s, those dates symbolize the end of the era of great hopes and the beginning of the era of great disappointment.

O.Sh.: Those "disappointed" probably still remember mass protests and civil mobilization of the '90s. They, of course, would like to see the same changes nowadays. Those people often do not see preconditions for the transformation process in modern Belarus. My generation looks at Belarusian perspectives differently. As a researcher, I was challenged by the shutdown of EHU in Minsk in 2004. I had to ask myself: can I engage in any other, non-academic activity? Can we, researchers, become journalists, writers, or civic activists? The whole following year of search for answers enriched me, since I found out that Belarus was full of empty "niches."

T.A.: Your "idea of Europe," the publicity that you "provoke" in Belarusian environment, are apparently contrary to the national project that was set up in the '90s. Do you notice the clash between these ideas?

O.Sh.: We started *Belintellectuals* based on dialogue, and we transferred that approach to all our further projects. In *Belintellectuals* we presented the viewpoints of all existing Belarusian intellectuals, including the founder of the Belarusian Collegium Ales' Antsipenka, Valiantsin Akudovich, Ihar Babkou, and many others. On the other hand, there are differences between us and other generations. My colleagues more than others aim at the applicability of social and humanitarian knowledge and research to the construction of a new, democratic, and European Belarus. Neither the European nor the national idea is our "sacred cow." The idea of Europe is our reference point, but we approach it with criticism. Our goal is to join the rest of Europeans

in their discussion on the European idea and build Belarus based on this discussion. Such critical approach is the only way to work with the society, memory, identity.

T.A.: You introduce yourself as "political" philosopher. At the same time, you are an active participant and expert in Belarusian cultural events. What causes your interest in culture?

O.Sh.: I think that culture allows for transformations that are impossible in present-day politics. People can easily discuss important issues in a cultural environment, leaving politics aside. However, this is also political participation, performed in a non-traditional way. In my view, culture is a *transitional* sphere. A gallery is already a public space that is more attractive and comprehensible to many people than politics. I think that the significance and possibilities of culture are highly underestimated in Belarus.

T.A.: How would you describe the state of culture in Belarus?

O.Sh.: Belarusian informal culture is losing its traditional national orientation and becomes more global, still bearing some local peculiarities. The most significant independent projects in the '90s were mostly related to the traditional Belarusian culture. New standards emerge and enter the sphere of research now; those standards existed in Soviet times, during *perestroika* and in the post-Soviet periods, and now we see that they had been preconditions for the development of a *different* Belarus. Diverse content becomes important. Let's take arts: we see the emergence of not only new names, but whole new trends there. The emerging diversity constructs a new Belarusian culture.

T.A.: All this is true for informal, independent culture, which is really perceptive of new trends and criticism. But official culture.

O.Sh.: Is degrading.

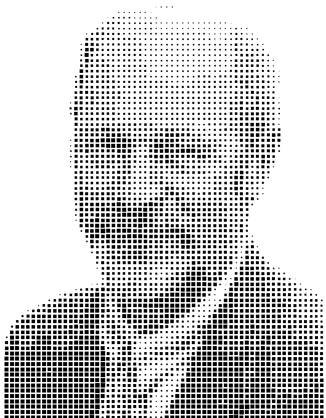
T.A.: Right. We all clearly realize that, in one way or another, we are dependent on this official culture, on its legislation, on official education. Can we stop this "degradation" somehow or should we just wait for its "natural" end?

O.Sh.: We should not wait. We should act. According to our experience, it is difficult to interact with the state. The government often uses independent artists for its own purposes with no reward. However, we have to act: we have to strengthen our influence via new media, using the asset of open borders with other countries. The support of Europeans in this context is very important to Belarus. For instance, the EU could provide free visas for Belarusian cultural activists, or abandon visas for Belarusians in general. This would stimulate the cultural exchange that is vital for the development of any culture.

T.A.: What are the expected short-term outcomes of your activity?

O.Sh.: The future of Belarus, in my view, depends on the development of independent initiatives, magazines, and research centers. These projects can give an impulse to our future. In crucial points of history, the independent sector provides state institutions with experts. Therefore, we need to work hard to gain necessary knowledge and skills and to create, at least on the research level, a new vision of Belarus, fresh ideas for its transformation, a picture of *different* Belarus. Let me stress the importance of the interconnectedness of research and public space. We need to learn how to disseminate the results of research, how to influence different target groups, including future decision-makers.

The Belarusian language in modern Belarus is in an ambiguous situation. On one hand, the number of people who refer to Belarusian as their mother tongue and who speak Belarusian daily has significantly decreased. On the other hand, the attitude to the language is changing: it is no longer perceived as solely the language of opposition or peasants.



BELARUSIAN – THE LANGUAGE OF THE ÉLITE

ALEH TRUSAU – INTERVIEW

The Frantsishak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (TBM) public association, formed in 1989 and registered by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice in 1991, is a volunteer non-political organization that attracts representatives of Belarusian national elite and aims at providing a true state status for the language of indigenous ethnos. The Society works to protect the right of Belarusian-speaking citizens to use their mother tongue. TBM does not support the limitation of rights of the Russian-speaking population. However, it struggles to ensure respect for the native language of Belarusians.

TBM actively participates in big projects related to the protection of Belarusian language and its promotion in different areas of life in Belarus. In 1991, the Society participated in the creation of The State Program for

the Development of the Belarusian Language and Other National Languages in Belarus. In 1994–95, together with the Ministry of Education, TBM organized two national conferences on Belarusian terminology. The Society closely monitors the violation of linguistic rights of Belarusian citizens, organizes educational contests and programs for children and youths, and operates the TBM Book Club, where meetings with Belarusian writers take place. Its library of old books contains more than six hundred rare and unique publications. The organization's committees include the organizational, publishing, educational, terminological ones; the committee on language culture and improvements of orthography, on toponymy and historical symbols, on the visual and audial aspects of living environments, and on international relations.

Outstanding representatives of Belarusian elite were members of TBM in due time, such as writers and scientists Maksim Tank, Barys Sachanka, Fiodar Yankouski… Vasil Bykau, Yanka Bryl, Mikhal Dziamchuk, Anton Butsevich, Tamara Sauchuk, Yauhen Vaitovich, Zianon Pazniak, Yury Khadyka, Aleh Loyka, Adam Maldzis, Artur Volski, Anatol Klyshka, Viachaslau Adamchyk actively contributed to the work of the organization. Currently, well-known figures of Belarusian culture, such as Henadz Buraukin, Nil Hilevich, Henadz Tsykhun, Radzim Haretski, Vasil Zuyonak, Leanid Lych, Uladzimer Sodal, Volha Ipatava and Uladzimer Arlou are members of the National Board of the organization.

Aleh Trusau, a PhD in history and a well-known activist, has been the leader of the Society since 1999. Under his leadership, TBM has transformed into a truly national organization, with its branches working in 75 out of 118 districts of Belarus. The organization's members live in Irkutsk, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Vilnius, Bialystok, Prague and Sevastopol. In 2007, due to the efforts of TBM members, a Belarusian-language TV channel Belsat was set up in Poland. The Society prepared a Strategy of the Development of Belarusian Language in the 21st century which includes long-term campaigns. It envisages the introduction of changes into national legislation, including the Law on Languages so that the Belarusian language receive a truly state status; the concept also proposes that Belarusian-speaking groups in kindergartens and Belarusian-language schools and classes should be opened nationwide. It aims as well at setting up the Belarusian National University.

Ales Barysevich: Mr. Trusau, TBM's achievements of many years sound really impressive. What is on your agenda these days?

Aleh Trusau: First of all, we are getting stronger with the course of time. My feeling is supported by the fact that we are the only organization that is recognized by Belarusian authorities, even though they don't like us. Just this week, I won in four situations involving authorities. For instance, we prevented them from shutting down a Belarusian-speaking class in Biaroza. Just have a look at three letters that I have received this morning… we get something like that every day:

> *"...An additional class with Belarusian as the language of tuition will be opened in Maladzechna Yanka Kupala secondary school…"*
>
> *"…The education department is not raising the issue of closing a Belarusian-speaking class. The 4th-graders of the Belarusian-speaking class, as well as students of other classes, will be able to continue their education in the Belarusian-speaking class in Biaroza city, according to the wish of their parents…"*
>
> *"…the head of the Belarusian railway department issued the recommendation to change title plates. The titles will be written in two languages at bigger railway stations and terminals, in Belarusian only at other stations. Currently, the names of stops, stations and railway terminals are written mostly in Belarusian. The announcements of trains are sometimes made in Belarusian. The new concept of the web page of the company will envisage a Belarusian language version."*

A.B.: The law on the two state languages, Belarusian and Russian, was adopted in Belarus in 1998. Was it a turning point for your organization?

A.T.: The 1999 national census, when the majority of the surveyed showed their mostly negative attitude to the language, was a more significant event for us. The Belarusian language was labeled as the language of the opposition. Surely, the 1998 law confirmed the status of the Russian language in the framework of the official state bilingualism. The worst thing was that the law allowed throwing the Belarusian language overboard. Since then, we have been fighting all the time to change it. For more than five years,

the government has been giving us promises, but they do not change anything. Still, we make sure all the time that they do not loosen up. In 2003, we got the decision of the Constitutional Court that the law was contradictory to the Belarusian Constitution because the wording "or/either" allowed Belarusian officials to avoid speaking Belarusian. The government knows that it violated the Constitution, so they make some concessions.

A.B.: You state that TBM is the only organization that is recognized by the authorities. How do you cooperate with them?

A.T.: Let's take a recent example of Belarusian-speaking classes. Once I read in *Svobodnye Novosti Plus* newspaper that a Belarusian-speaking class would be closed in Biaroza. I copied the article and sent it to the minister of education. As a result, the class is not being closed. Then I read in *Nasha Niva* about the situation in Maladzechna and informed the minister again. Here is the consequence: the classes will not be closed. As for the situation with the railway, the members of TBM alerted us about it: they brought two pictures that proved that the names of the stations were written only in Russian. We made inquiries, and it came out that there was some engineer there who ordered to write everything in Russian. If we had not intervened, the process would have spread throughout Belarus.

A.B.: How many members do you have?

A.T.: We have around 5,500 members who pay membership fees, subscribe to newspapers, help to monitor violations. We also have TBM supporters, around 30,000. These people help us in our work, as in the case of the railways.

A.B.: So, is your Society a kind of a "network" spread across Belarus?

A.T.: I would even call it an international network. We have many members abroad, from Australia to the United States. The authorities are aware about that, and therefore, they recognize us. By the way, I am the only person in this country who is a member of two consultative state bodies: one is affiliated with the Presidential Administration, the other – with the Council of Ministers. This gives me some wiggle room. I am able to talk privately and

discuss problematic issues with Belarusian officials who support many of my suggestions.

A.B.: What is happening with the Belarusian language as such?

A.T.: On one hand, the statistics show that we have less and less education in the Belarusian language. The former minister of education contributed to this. For instance, he decided that the history and geography of Belarus should be taught in Russian. The current minister takes a wait-and-see attitude. At least, thank God, he is not doing any harm. So, I hope that the Ministry of Education will curb its Russification zeal.

Belarusian – the language of the élite

On the other hand, the attitude to the Belarusian language is changing. First of all, the changes are underway inside the government. Government officials are reshuffled from time to time, and newcomers are often the same people who waved white-red-white flags in their student years twenty years ago. They know and respect the Belarusian language. When the local authorities change in some region, they change door plates in the first place. The most active supporters of changes are the heads of Hrodna and Mahiliou regions. They speak Belarusian at official meetings and try to speak Belarusian in private life. The Homel region is in a worse situation, since the local authorities either ignore or dislike the Belarusian language. It appears that each region has a specific situation: some village council will get it right, the other will be indifferent, and some other will be fighting against the Belarusian language. At the same time, we are glad to notice positive trends among young people. The statistical data show that many youngsters from Russian-speaking schools choose the Belarusian language for their final tests, and the results of those tests are significantly better than the results of the tests taken in Russian.

A.B.: Is Belarusian actively spoken in everyday life?

A.T.: Recent sociological surveys show that more than half of Belarusians respect those who speak the Belarusian language. I met a friend today, and we were talking loudly in Belarusian in the middle of a busy avenue. A man of about thirty approached us and thanked us for our Belarusian language. He even tried to say a couple of words in Belarusian. Ten years ago he would call us nationalists. This shows a profound change in the attitude to the

language and to the culture in general. The government is actively restoring cultural landmarks. Who would ever think that they would restore the Mir castle or the Niasvizh castle? Yet they did, and they also reconstructed the historic town halls in Minsk and Mahiliou. Why did it happen? Of course, they managed to get some investment. Still, in my view, the real reason is that the authorities want to be Europeans. They are sick and tired of, so to say, "walking in bast shoes…" So, they start to pay attention to the language. The new minister of culture is Paval Latushka, a person who speaks Belarusian every day at home and at work. He is an active member of TBM, by the way. We have quite a few former members among officials.

So, we have an ambiguous and complex language situation. The number of people who name Belarusian as their mother tongue has dropped. According to the recent census, much less people speak Belarusian every day nowadays than did so ten years ago, but the attitude to the language has improved. By the way, I have considerable doubts that 37% of Belarusians really spoke Belarusian every day ten years ago… maybe they answered in that way in protest. So, I think the new census gives us a more accurate picture, even though the authorities have come up with some tricks like "what is the primary language of your childhood," while it was obvious that Russian was such a language to the majority of Belarusians. According to the new results, 1.5 million Belarusians speak Belarusian every day. This is 1.5 times bigger than the population of Estonia. So, the language will not die.

A.B.: What, in your opinion, caused this change of attitude to the language?

A.T.: I think that it was facilitated by twenty years of independence. People understand that they are not Russians. Even the president said that we might be "Russians, but with a quality mark." Generally speaking, there are many interesting trends in Belarusian society. Surprisingly, Minsk comes out on top. It becomes the main "native speaker" environment of Belarus, while the language is dying in the village, because more and more peasants are speaking *trasianka* (a mixed Russian-Belarusian dialect). The number of Belarusian-speaking families is growing. We have dozens of thousands such families, while these were isolated cases some years ago. When I switched to Belarusian in 1982, I guess, not more than a couple of hundred people talked in Belarusian in Minsk.

A.B.: So, the Belarusian language is no more a rural one?

A.T.: You are right. It becomes the language of elites. Young officials realize this. If an official goes abroad and doesn't speak Belarusian…

A.B.: …people would think that he is from Russia?

A.T.: Absolutely. Even businessmen actively switch to Belarusian nowadays. I have friends among entrepreneurs and their moods are changing. They were indifferent before, but now they decide to take a course of Belarusian so that they look civilized in Europe. Advertising in Belarusian language emerges. Naturally, we facilitated that by sending letters to the managements of Samsung, Galina Blanca, Renault and others, whom we suggested switching their advertising into Belarusian. They listened to us and decided to set up an experiment. It appeared that if a billboard was in Belarusian, their sales grew by 10–11%, since the billboard was distinguishable from the Russian-language ones. Later local companies followed the example of foreign ones.

Belarusian – the language of the élite

A.B.: Which strategies could the state implement to spread the language wider?

A.T.: This is a simple matter. Belarusians, as we know, speak the language of their bosses. So, we need to strive for more Belarusian-speaking officials in the government. No drastic change is needed. We don't need to change the Constitution or any particular law. The Ministry of Culture is a very representative example. The previous minister did not speak Belarusian, and this was reflected in his cultural policies. Latushka arrived, and in five days all officials around him switched to Belarusian. I was a faculty dean for two years, and after my first year all professors switched to Belarusian, some even started lecturing in Belarusian. I never coerced anyone, never banned Russian. I just spoke Belarusian every day and maintained documents in Belarusian. I know that my ex-faculty speaks Belarusian even now. This turned into some kind of a tradition, even a fashion. All our students, whether they are studying museum or library sciences, speak perfect Belarusian. I taught Belarusian even to the Chinese. As it turned out, our language is much closer

to Chinese than to Russian. We have such sounds as *dzh* and *dz*, so Chinese students could easily pronounce *dziakuj*, while they had problems with Russian *spasibo*. The Russian language is very difficult to learn. For us, Belarusians, it seems easy, since we learn it from childhood. Try to learn it from scratch! I know that Ivonka Survila, the president of the Belarusian People's Republic, speaks eight to nine languages but doesn't speak any Russian. When our emigrants turn to her in Russian, they cannot believe that she doesn't get a word. She never heard Russian, since they only spoke Belarusian at home.

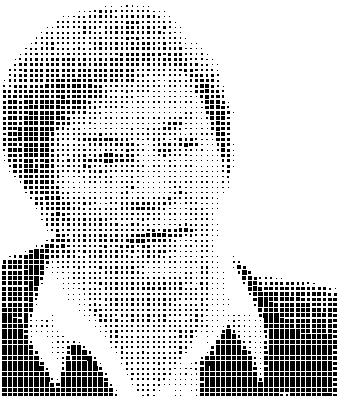
A.B.: What are the partner organizations of the Society?

A.T.: There are many of them. Our best friends are The Union of Belarusian Writers, the World Association of Belarusians "Backawshchyna," the Society of Belarusian School.

A.B.: Besides those everyday small victories, what are the Society's current activities?

A.T.: We organize a Law School as well as various trainings and courses. Our study circle Speech, which is now taking a summer break, brings together people of all ages and professions to learn oratorical skills. The circle was organized by a young woman working in a bank. Many volunteers supported her. They even set up a web page. We have study circles for young people. For instance, we have a study circle on Belarus' history for school students. The work is going on in the regions as well. Our representatives have their web pages and publications. By the way, we are the only association that publishes two newspapers: *Nasha Slova* and *Novy Chas*, as well as a registered magazine for youths *Verasen'.* We publish books, postcards and calendars. Recently, we received an American grant that allowed us to publish an English-Belarusian and Belarusian-English phrasebook, which was the first publication of such type in Belarus. We circulated it among officials as well. Currently, we are planning to publish the Belarusian-language rules of the road, something we have been trying to do for the past five years. We are stubborn, so we will get our own way.

The independent media sector in Belarus continues to defend the right of journalists to work freely in their profession. Facing constant ideological pressure from the government and hit by the recent economic crisis, non-state media try to “survive.”



JOURNALISM AWARDS

ZHANNA LITVINA – INTERVIEW

Zhanna Litvina – is the chairperson of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the biggest independent organization working in the media field in Belarus. BAJ unites people who work as professional journalists or promote the development of journalism. Based in Minsk, the association has five branches in the regions of Belarus. BAJ has been an associate member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) since 1997. In 2003, the work of the organization was recognized by the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) with the Golden Pen of Freedom prize. In December 2004, the European Parliament awarded BAJ with the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. In June 2011, BAJ received the Atlantic Council Freedom Award.

A.B.: Zhanna, the work of BAJ in Belarus is truly unique. For more than fifteen years, your organization has been dealing with not only educational and social programs. Importantly, you also defend the rights and interests of independent journalists. How did the history of BAJ begin? Did you expect back in 1995 how important the work of BAJ would have become?

Zh.L.: In my opinion, time was ripe for a new journalistic organization to emerge. Some interesting developments forestalled the establishment of BAJ. I refer to that period as "renaissance" for Belarusian independent journalism. New independent newspapers emerged; ambiance was very free. There were also personal circumstances that played a role in the emergence of BAJ. Right after the election of the president of Belarus, the radio station Belaruskaya Maladzyozhnaya was shut down. Belarusian State TV and Radio company fired eighteen journalists of that station alongside with me, the then station's editor-in-chief. The awareness of the need for corporate solidarity and mutual aid led to the emergence of a new journalistic organization.

Several dozens of people attended the first meeting of BAJ. At that moment, I could not fully realize the mission or future activities of the organization. However, life quickly put everything into place. The first statement BAJ passed was a protest over the banishment of the newspapers: *Narodnaya Volya*, *Imya* and *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* from the state-owned printing house. The newspapers had to publish in Lithuania. So, the main priorities of our activity quickly took shape. Firstly, it is legal consultations for our fellow journalists. Secondly, the introduction of educational programs. With time, I get more and more convinced that, unfortunately, we are losing the profession.

The current situation in Belarus is unique. The whole media community is divided into two parts. Some have assumed and resignedly perform the function of ideologists and propagandists, by and large, serving the executive branch of power. Others are our colleagues who work for non-state publications, desperately trying to keep to professional standards. Today, there are over 1,000 members of BAJ. We publish our own magazine *Abazhur,* which grew from a small booklet into a full-format publication. Besides, we run various campaigns like "For Historical Heritage," "For Environmental Prosperity," and "For Quality Journalism."

A.B.: What are BAJ's priorities today?

Zh.L.: Unfortunately, there are problems in the media field that we have tried hard to solve and that have become "our routine". Over the past five to seven years, our demands for equal economic conditions for the operation of the media regardless of the form of ownership have remained high on agenda. We object to political and economic discrimination against independent media. The state-owned press continues to enjoy budgetary subsidies. In our view, this is totally wrong, because it prevents competition in the media market. On the other hand, the more the state subsidizes, the more right it has to control the media and make use of them for its own purposes. From such a standpoint, this situation seems logical. Access to information remains the most acute issue for Belarusian journalists, and things get even worse year after year. The Decree No 68, signed by the president earlier this year, has once again expanded the list of enterprises and organizations that are allowed to classify information about their activities. Currently, there are fifty-eight organizations on this list. Well, I can understand that the Security Council may have secrets. However, I can hardly understand what kind of secrets the Minsk City Hall, Belarusian State TV and Radio company or the Ministry of Information would have. It is absurd. The existence of numerous ideology workers that hinder journalists' access to information is similarly ludicrous.

The problem of freelancers fits into the same category. Under the media law passed two years ago, journalists are banned from cooperating with the foreign media without accreditation in Belarus. All attempts by our journalist colleagues who cooperate with Belsat, Radio Racja to obtain accreditation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are in vain. The denials of accreditation are justified by absolutely absurd explanations like, for instance: "We reject your accreditation request, because, until now, you have been working without accreditation."

The third problem of the media sector is related with Belarusian laws. For many years, BAJ has demanded to bring Belarusian media laws in line with international legal standards. No result so far.

The Internet with its booming news websites and social networks is a special topic for us. According to experts, the Belarusian government realizes the potential threat of the Internet. Hence, 12 enactments were passed

in this country in the past year, aiming to regulate Internet communication. In this way, the government tries to get control over the web space. For instance, several days after the April 11, 2011 tragic blast in Minsk subway, the Office of Prosecutor General issued a resolution, limiting access of state agencies to Charter'97 and Belarusian partisan (*the largest opposition portals – author's note*). We are very alarmed by such measures. As I already said, this refers to our *routine* problems. Today, the economic factor has contributed to the dire situation. In the conditions of a harsh financial crisis, state-run publications may count on support from the government. Non-state newspapers face soaring printing costs and the price of newsprint, supplied to them by the Mogiliov paper mill at the price 1,5 higher than for state print media. In this situation, non-state newspapers have ended up at the verge of bankruptcy. Add to this growing social stress. People don't understand what's going on and demand uncensored information. We have entered the period when ideological approaches and propaganda are no longer effective. In present-day journalism, there is demand for serious analysis based on intellectual approach. The floor should be given to experts. Modern journalism needs constant dialogue about the present and the future.

A.B.: You have mentioned the "incompatibility" of the Belarusian media legal framework with international standards. How are they incompatible?

Zh.L.: Several years ago, we were excited about some provisions in the new media law. For instance, it was no longer required to seek approval from local authorities for the venue of an editorial office. Previously, prior to obtaining a registration permit, a newspaper had to approach the local executive committee and seek permission to be located on the territory of this region. Permission could be easily refused. This repressive measure allowed to keep control over and delay the emergence of publications. The provision was removed from the new law. However, a year ago, the Ministry of Information re-introduced a number of absolutely unexpected limitations. For instance, a newly founded newspaper can be edited only by a person with a university degree, who has at least five years of managerial experience in the media. There is an unwritten list of names of journalists who are somewhat associated with the opponents of the government. It is impossible to register a newspaper led by one of those journalists. Over the past

year alone, eight editorial offices were refused registration. A complicated registration procedure is one of the peculiarities of Belarusian legislation. In the whole world, registration is application-based. One just needs to inform that he or she is entering the newspaper business, and that's sufficient. There are countries with their own peculiarities, of course. But, it seems to me that Belarus is the only country with such a huge number of required permits. Many European countries do not have a media law at all, leaving the regulation of media activity to civil and penal codes.

A.B.: What are the latest statistics on non-state media in Belarus?

Zh.L.: According to the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, as of April 1, 2011 there were 961 independent publications out of 1,362 print mass media. However, despite the quantitative lead of non-state media, the information space of Belarus is dominated by state-owned media. The majority of non-state publications are entertainment- and advertising--focused. Only some thirty non-state publications cover political and social developments in this country on a permanent basis. In the conditions of the current economic crisis, we are wary of further deterioration of the situation in the independent media market. As I said earlier, economic inequality is an important factor in this situation.

A.B.: What are these economic "double standards" all about?

Zh.L.: First of all, it is about the price of newsprint and printing services. Secondly, as of today, eleven leading non-state newspapers experience problems with access to state-run distribution networks. As a result, newspapers are forced to invest additional funds in setting up their own small distribution schemes. Besides, there is an unwritten rule for banks, for instance, not to place their ads in non-state newspapers. On top of that, independent media have faced yet another problem during the crisis – debit debts that affect even those newspapers that are disseminated via state--run distribution networks. Let's take the example of *Svobodnye Novosti Plus* – a newspaper that cannot be subscribed to, but sells in kiosks. Today, Belsoyuzpechat defaults payments to this newspaper. There are many more cases like that, all of them associated with the paying capacity of organizations.

Such problems are hitting hard the budgets of independent newspapers. It is noteworthy that this year the government allocated around 54 mln euros of national budgetary means to support state-run media.

A.B.: Apart from BAJ, the Belarusian Union of Journalists works in Belarus. Unfortunately, this is a natural situation in the Belarusian context. For instance, there are two writers unions: the Belarusian Union of Writers and the Union of Writers of Belarus…

Zh.L.: I always add ironically that there are even two unions of Poles in Belarus. The divide of the society has been pushed to the limit. (*The "split" in the Union of Poles of Belarus occurred in 2005, when the Belarusian authorities "provoked" the re-election of the Union's chairperson. As a result, there is the pro-government Union of Poles, and there is an unofficial, basically illegal, organization backed by Poland — author's note*).

A.B.: This "duality" seems to have become a sign of our times. As for BAJ and BUJ, despite commonalities, the two organizations clearly have different priorities. In your opinion, how distinctive is your work from what the fellow journalists from BUJ do?

Zh.L.: Talking about internal documents of these two organizations, for instance, the Code of Ethics, many provisions do match. But in practice, the principal goals and our understanding of the place and role of journalism in society differ. Let's take Belarus' National TV and Radio Company as an example. According to the charter, this is a central state agency with the mission to cover the policy of the state. I believe this contradicts the essence of journalism. Journalists should, first of all, gather and disseminate information, doing it as professionally as possible. By no means can they degrade into government servants. This is how we differ.

A.B.: Do you manage to cooperate somehow with BUJ?

Zh.L.: Unfortunately, BAJ was not able to get BUJ's signatures under appeals in the situations of concern for the whole journalistic community in Belarus. Let me give you a demonstrative example. Once we approached our

colleagues from the Union, proposing to carry out joint evaluation of the new media legislation. They turned down our proposal. Later, other professional problems like economic discrimination began to emerge. Ten years ago, when the state-run distribution networks Belpochta and Belsoyuzpechat refused to sell non-state newspapers, our fellow journalists from the Union rendered no support. They showed no solidarity over the trials of journalists, either. In 2002, Nikolai Markevich, Viktor Ivashkevich, Pavel Mozheiko were convicted of libeling and degrading the president. Over two months ago, criminal charges were filed against *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s journalist Andrzej Poczobut. Unfortunately, our colleagues from the Union totally ignore these problems; they don't even mention them. However, I still believe that our consolidation is possible. At this point, we have launched a program together with Fojo (*Swedish Institute for Further Education of Journalists – translator's note*) that envisages the participation of journalists from BAJ and BUJ. During this program, the Swedish press Ombudsman is expected to pay a visit to Belarus. Swedish journalists will visit state-run and independent editorial offices. I would very much like to believe that this will urge the consolidation of the whole journalistic community.

A.B.: Do you see any problems in journalism education?

Zh.L.: The problem is there, and in my opinion, it is very serious. There is only one educational institution that teaches journalism. Previously, it was called the Faculty of Journalism at Belarus State University. Now, it is called the Institute of Journalism at Belarus State University. But the essence has not changed. Moreover, when the re-organization was in progress, some voices called out for the faculty to become an ideological institution. Luckily, common sense prevailed. Hence, educational programs remain one of BAJ's priorities. We organize master classes, press clubs, with both foreign and Belarusian professionals.

A.B.: In the light of the recent presidential election in Belarus, a crack-down on independent journalists and biased coverage of those events by state-run media, the Council of the EU imposed travel-ban sanctions against some Belarusian journalists. Can you comment on these sanctions?

Zh.L.: I have a reserved attitude towards this measure. Every time I am asked about it, the first thing I stress is that BAJ has nothing to do with this. It is bad, of course, when such measures are taken against journalists. On the other hand, the ban applies to the so-called journalist functionaries who consider themselves government officials. From this angle, this measure is fairly understandable.

A.B.: Non-state publications are routinely closed down in Belarus. Big newspapers like *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* are under the threat of closure right now. In your view, how justified is this stringent state control over media?

Zh.L.: Presidential election campaigns usually turn into calamities for the media. After the 2001 presidential campaign, we lost half of independent newspapers. Some closed their businesses due to economic conditions; some were shut down by court orders. Since 2006, the distribution of non-state media via state agencies has been officially limited by law. After the latest electoral campaign, *Avtoradio* was closed down. The Ministry of Information filed lawsuits against the *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* newspapers, seeking their closure over warnings. Under Belarusian laws, a newspaper can be closed down after two warnings for violating any provisions of the media law. Personal warnings are issued to journalists. The threat of closure proves that the media situation is critical.

A.B.: BAJ's work was recognized by numerous international awards. In June 2011, you received the Atlantic Council Freedom Award during the Wroclaw Global Forum 2011. How important are such awards?

Zh.L.: It is always exciting, of course. For instance, apart from BAJ, other Atlantic Council Freedom awardees from Belarus were the human rights center "Viasna" and the Free Theater. But, quite frankly, I am more pleased when we get awards for achievements in journalism rather than for the struggle to defend our rights. Those are the dearest awards for journalists.

A.B.: What are the prospects for developing independent journalism? What could cause a change?

Zh.L.: In my opinion, serious changes in the media field are possible only when the mass media are de-monopolized and denationalized. The government must abandon the monopoly for information. Equal economic conditions should be put in place to allow more competition for the media. Society would get an opportunity to receive uncensored, free, and timely information. At the end of the day, those processes would allow to reintroduce "dialogue" to the media and to give people an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions. This is extremely important. The media should take on this function of a platform for dialogue.

The Belarusian state treats gender problems as merely a “female issue” assigned to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. In other words, the government pays attention exclusively to the social aspects of the problem, ignoring the fact that it concerns men and women equally.



BELARUSIAN GENDER EQUALITY

IRINA ALKHOVKA – INTERVIEW

Irina Alkhovka is the chairwoman of the “Gender Perspectives” international public association and the founder of La Strada Belarus, a program which prevents human trafficking in Central and Eastern Europe. Since 1995, she has been an active participant of social movements in Belarus. For a long time she has been the leader of the Association of Young Christian Women in Belarus. As a result of the Association’s reorganization, “Gender Perspectives” emerged. The organization aims at achieving real equality between women and men and eradicating discrimination based on gender with the help of social programs preventing gender-based violence.

Alena Kopats': Irina, what was the reason to start a new organization, "Gender Perspectives?"

Irina Alkhovka: It became clear at some stage that the new goals set by the Association of Young Christian Women, and some new projects such as La Strada Belarus program, had to be implemented by a separate organization. We decided to split. The "Gender Perspectives" association emerged, and, as you see from the title, it is not just about women. We do not consider ourselves to be limited by the women's sector. It is obvious that nowadays, even in Belarus, gender problems are not exclusively faced by women but rather constitute part of the larger societal problems. We want to target the social market with projects for men as well. Currently, we are in the final stages of drafting our four-year strategic plan. After that, we will take clear steps.

A.K.: Could you explain what La Strada program is about? What does it do?

I.A.: It is important to not only name the problem of human trafficking. We have to suggest possible solutions to this problem. Only ten years ago, naming the issue was the most important thing. In 2000, some state officials who came to our training dedicated to the problem of sexual exploitation of Belarusian women were outraged. For them, Belarus did not have such a problem and the exploitation of Belarusian women was impossible. Today, the government admits the problem of human trafficking. The Penal Code of Belarus provides punishment for such actions. So, now we need to act, not just talk.

Our purpose is not to terrify people in any way, so that they would stop going abroad, since, of course, migration gives a person an opportunity for self-realization. Everyone has a right to live and work in whichever country they decide. Therefore, we address mainly the issues of migration safety, proceeding from the global goal of human trafficking prevention. We set up a consulting hot line on our web page, advising citizens on how to make their immigration safer. We continue to support victims of human trafficking. At the moment, there is some "slack," since the number of victims has fallen. But we know that people mostly report their experience several years after exploitation happens. For such victims, we have a social support service,

which together with a person in need develops a program of individual rehabilitation and reintegration to provide the person with the whole range of social services free. Naturally, we don't do that on our own. We have a network of partners from different fields, including lawyers, doctors, psychologists, social workers. We cooperate with employment agencies and with partner NGOs that work, for example, with drug addicts. We are fully responsible for everyone who comes to us seeking help, so that they need not to visit every institution and tell their stories all over again. After providing those people with assistance, we monitor their lives, checking if they are able to find a job, solve their own problems, meet their significant others. That is to say, we do not work by wearing out the seats of pants and trying to imagine what a victim would need; we work with people face-to-face… Therefore, we know exactly which areas need to be improved on the legislative level, and at various formal meetings we use the facts from real-life situations. For example, there is a law in Belarus which entitles human trafficking victims to free medical and social assistance. However, every Belarusian citizen is entitled to the same kind of assistance in public institutions. So, we explain the officials that when a person is in a unique traumatic situation, she/he cannot waste time waiting in lines. This category of citizens needs acute care and more flexible, more special treatment.

A.K.: What is the level of your contacts with state institutions? Do officials lend their ears to you? What is the state of Belarusian legislation on human trafficking in principle?

I.A.: Everyone admits that Belarusian legislation in this area is very progressive, since the issue of human trafficking is considered at the highest political level. The president talks about it; Belarus promotes various UN-level initiatives. Sometimes, though, the state reacts not as fast as we wish. The problem of human trafficking is seemingly well-researched. So, when the new, previously unknown, trends emerge, the state bodies do not immediately react to these new aspects of the problem. Still, I think that it is a rather normal bureaucratic procedure that can be found in any country. For that reason, some advocacy campaigns go on for three to four years.

We have an active media policy. When La Strada just started, we decided to strongly focus on setting up ties with journalists. There was a year when

they published several hundreds of articles about us. When a state official opens a paper and reads news about some problem, then listens to a radio report on the same issue, and later watches a TV report on the same topic, he/she understands the essence of that problem better. Our strong point is that we process and analyze the data that we get as straight tips from people. We have sociologists among staffers. We analyze our hot line calls, tracking the changes, such as the number of calls, the gender of callers, and the ways Belarusians choose where they go to work, where to study, and where to marry. It is important to keep such statistics, because, unfortunately, we do not have any proven data that would describe the migration and attitudes of Belarusians.

According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection's Scientific Research Institute, every year around 100,000 Belarusians go off to look for work in Russia. Intermediary law firms facilitate up to 6,000 labor contracts, mostly in the framework of the U.S. Work and Travel program. However, these numbers are quite relative, since they register only those who sign official contracts, facilitated by companies. The migration flow to Russia is impossible to be tracked as such, since we do not have a border with Russia. So, our statistics add up to these figures. Every year we get around 700–1,000 phone calls we use as a basis for our calculations. For instance, according to our data, people migrate to Germany both on marriage or labor contracts. France is mostly a "marital" country. Russia is almost solely a "labor" destination. We voice those data during formal meetings and invite officials to our seminars. They consider our information and implement changes, although sometimes not as fast as we want.

A.K.: You mentioned that the activities of "Gender Perspectives" go beyond only women's equal rights…

I.A.: True. This is quite a new approach to gender issues in the Belarusian context. Gender organizations were and are in Belarus, but they limit themselves to exclusively women's issues. Surely, the gender theory started from that, since women were always especially vulnerable and treated as "the second sex." The world has changed.

Belarus' official gender policy was initiated back in 1995, after the Beijing Conference. Fifteen documents were signed during 1995–2010, all aiming

at improving social protection of women and children. As of today, it is impossible to stick to such a narrow, very limited meaning of gender. Should we be solving the problems of one sex by discriminating the other one? The Belarusian state is still treating gender problems as merely a "female issue" that is assigned to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, i.e. that this issue is placed solely in a social dimension. Other bodies, especially security, defense, and law enforcement agencies, are not sufficiently involved in the promotion of this issue. It is time to adjust this strategy. Still, it is a positive sign that they discuss this on the highest level. This year, a new national gender equality plan will be signed. (*In late May, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Belarus organized a round-table discussion entitled "The implementation of gender policy in the Republic of Belarus," where the project of a 2011–2014 National Action Plan on gender equality was discussed. Representatives of women's organizations, UNICEF, and UNFPA participated in the discussion – author's note*). The plan's obvious strong point is that it urges the drafting of the concept on gender equality, the development of methodology for carrying out the gender expertise of state programs, adoption of laws on equal rights of men and women, and prevention of domestic violence. It would set up the rules of tenders for social services and support Schools for Dads. A long-term concept is needed to ensure that a more global goal will gradually be achieved by all the consecutive plans. It will ensure continuity and consistency.

Another aspect of the problem is that only women's organizations deal with gender equality issues in Belarus. This contributes to the misinterpretation of the problem. For example, Belarusian courts tend to leave children of divorced couples with their mothers, although the law gives equal rights to both parents. Judges that determine child custody follow the outdated patterns and prioritize women. On the other hand, there were cases when fathers got custody, so some progress is there. Besides, under Belarusian laws, not only mothers are entitled to maternity leave; any family member is allowed to take a childcare leave instead of a mother. In 2008, according to statistics, only 3% men invoked that right.

The process of overcoming social stereotypes goes very slowly, since neither the state nor NGOs have a clear strategy on this matter. Instead of drafting a long-term strategy or developing new topics and initiatives, they live from project to project. We want to invite men to work in our

organization, since it is impossible to have a sensible talk about gender issues while employing only women. We need men. We need their alternative point of view. I hope we will be able to expand gradually the way of thinking about gender in Belarusian society. True, there are some figures that show the growth of allowances and extension of maternity leaves, but gender equality is more than just that. Currently, the number of men who want to participate in parenting is rising. I consider that a very positive sign. New programs emerge that deal with this important issue.

A.K.: Would you agree that Belarus has not just some women's, gender organizations, but a comprehensive gender movement?

I.A.: Not yet. Our organizations tried to consolidate, but those attempts were caused by external influence. For instance, Americans implemented a project, which created a network of Belarusian women's associations. When the project was finished, the network vanished. Unlike the initiatives of environmentalists or HIV/AIDS activists, women's organizations are not consolidated into any sustainable network. A while ago I read an article which stated that Belarus had many feminist leaders and initiatives, but no feminist policy. I totally agree. We actively speak up and implement programs, so we exist in public space. However, there is no clear movement, no single policy like in the field of environmental protection. A public council affiliated with the Ministry of Environment influences the decision making and protests against the construction of the nuclear power plant. We have nothing like that in the gender sector. Moreover, we are in conflict with men's organizations, and this is the evidence that we are contrasting male and female problems. I would like to reiterate that "Gender Perspectives" is not a 100% female organization, but I don't really see with whom else we could try to go under one umbrella.

A.K.: What are, if any, the unique characteristics of gender problems in Belarus?

I.A.: As I have said, the peculiarity of the Belarusian situation is that male aspects of gender issues are not raised there. This problem is generally treated as a women rights issue. Europeans have already realized that

protectionist policies do as much harm to women as discrimination. For example, women get benefits – allowances, extra weekends for the mothers of toddlers, etc. These benefits become barriers to women's employment, since employers are not interested in additional burden that women may bring to their finances. When a woman is interviewed for a job, she is asked not only about her professional qualifications, but about her children and marriage as well. "What if I hire her, teach her everything, and she will take a three-year maternity leave?" a potential employer thinks, although few mothers take such a long leave nowadays, since this would endanger their job or lower their proficiency level. Western governments realize it and take it into account. Our government, on the contrary, still believes that such benefits protect women. Give a woman a job, not benefits, don't discriminate her at job interviews, don't ask her about the number of her children and whether she plans to have more! We still hear sad stories of young women who tell us that commercial companies force them to sign a contract, under which they are prohibited to marry or get pregnant in the next three years. And women, naturally, sign those contracts, since they need a job. I hope there will be some progress in our society.

In my view, gender equality is, first of all, a means of raising the standard of living. One cannot have high living standards without equal access to information, education, jobs. Gender equality is part of all this. If we break professions, feelings into male and female ones, we can't really talk about any living standards. We cannot base our current achievements on the last century's statistics and say that we have really moved on from what we had a hundred years ago. For instance, we cannot seriously talk about maternal mortality ratio. The obstetrics in Belarus is of such a high quality, that odds for a woman or a child to die in a delivery room are minimal. If this happens, this would be a disaster. Let's set new goals, let's develop. Let's aim at making high-quality medical services accessible not only in Minsk, but in Smilovichi or Ushachi.

Special attention should be paid to putting equality principles into practice. Public opinion should be shaped so that an employer wouldn't even think about applying sex discrimination in job interviews. In essence, gender aspects are present in any problem, although people probably wouldn't think of it in such a way. Let's take HIV/AIDS. Men and women get infected in different ways. The problem of violence: men and women have

their own unique reading of this problem. Informing the society should be one of the main tasks of, among others, women's and gender organizations. Gender and age – these are the criteria that should form the basis for all programs. I can't get what a "gender-neutral" program means nowadays. In my view, such a program would be gender-blind.

A.K.: The understanding of gender equality has evidently changed in Belarus in the areas of legislation or statistics. Still, what could expedite this process? How much more time should pass before the society will change its attitude towards gender issues?

I.A.: This will directly depend on the goals set by the state. Some progress may take fifty years, some may take fifteen years. It is important to bring gender issues into public space. Obviously, gender problem is marginalized in Belarusian society. Many do not associate themselves with this problem. If we take the demographic problem, everyone works with it: the Ministry of the Interior deals with migration, the Ministry of Health ensures life expectancy rates, etc. When gender problem gets integrated into the work of several ministries, it will have a future. When the Ministry of Defense forms a gender department, it will be a sign of change, a sign of a new level of understanding of this issue in the society and its relevance to everyone.

Belarusian officials for the most part understand *Belarusian* as something dealing solely with ethnography and folklore. They do not really understand that Belarusian culture is a natural part of modern European context.



BELARUSIANS OF THE WORLD

NINA SHYDLOSKAYA - INTERVIEW

Founded in 1990, the international public World Association of Belarusians "Backawshchyna" is the biggest national platform of Belarusians, uniting diaspora organizations from more than 25 countries. The Congress of Belarusians of the World is held every four years to discuss the challenges for the Belarusian diaspora both abroad and inside Belarus. "Backawshchyna" was the one to start the discussion of the bill on Belarusians living abroad. The Association builds its activity around the national renaissance of Belarusian culture, language, education, and history. Since 2008, "Backawshchyna" has been the coordinator of the "Budzma Belarusami" national civic cultural campaign. Nina Shydlouskaya, the chairwoman of the Board of the Association, is sharing her story of "Backawshchyna."

Alena Kopats': "Backawshchyna" has been around for more than twenty years. During those years, you have witnessed all significant events in Belarusian life. How did social and political changes influence your activities?

Nina Shydloskaya: In late '80s, following the wave of a national "renaissance," Belarusian intellectuals, including those living abroad, as well as some state officials, decided to create an organization that would unite Belarusians regardless of their place of residence and represent their interests specifically in Belarus. This led to the creation of the World Association of Belarusians "Backawshchyna" in 1990. In 1993, the First Congress of Belarusians of the World took place in Minsk. More than a thousand people participated in the Congress. Many of them were not able to travel to Belarus during the Soviet era, but, while living abroad, they carried on the Belarusian tradition and founded Belarusian communities. Those communities, such as churches, centers, associations, in a way served as "embassies" of Belarus during Soviet times. The animated atmosphere of the First Congress was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Everyone felt the stateliness of the moment, and we had an impression that the Belarusian nation was consolidating at last. The First Congress was supported by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was held at the premises of the Opera and Ballet Theater. After 1994, the new government of Belarus took the country into another direction. The Second Congress, which took place in 1997, was a challenge to "Backawshchyna," since it coincided with the political divide of Belarusian society that concerned all Belarusians, regardless of their place of residence. It was important for us not to deepen the division.

Most nations very actively engage with their compatriots abroad and, accordingly, get a high dividend payout. The support given to compatriots returns to the country in the form of investments and know-how. Besides, it boosts the nation's image in the countries where the diaspora lives. Unfortunately, the new Belarusian government never had a clear policy on Belarusians living abroad. They did not develop legislation, did not communicate with the diaspora. In fact, Belarusians were left to their own devices. The state supported only those adhering to the official policies. Generally speaking, "Backawshchyna" was the only organization that united Belarusians regardless of their place of residence, social status, religious or political views.

A.K.: What are the main spheres of the Association's activities? What are your priorities?

N.S.: First of all, we facilitate information flow within the diaspora, so that a community, let's say, in Irkutsk, knows what is going on in a community in Canada. This informational center is important, since "Backawshchyna" has noticed a trend in the Belarusian diaspora: Belarusians who go abroad either assimilate in new countries or incline to join bigger and stronger communities which can provide them with assistance. If those who leave Belarus knew their roots, their identity, sought national ties, assimilation would not be happening. The web page of "Backawshchyna" and the organization's electronic and printed bulletins play the role of an informational center. They publish news about developments in Belarusian communities abroad.

Another achievement is our book series entitled Backawshchyna's Library. Currently, no official institution systematically studies the achievements or analyzes the current state and perspectives of Belarusian presence in the world. This is a gap we need to fill. So, we founded Backawshchyna's Library as a resource that would keep track of the achievements of the Belarusian diaspora and spread this knowledge inside Belarus. Gradually, due to the efforts by young scientists Natallia and Aleh Hardzienka in the first place, and with the help of the Belarusan Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York, the list of publications expanded to include not only fiction literature of Belarusians from abroad, but scientific and research papers on diasporas in a range of countries as well. This work continues.

The organization of congresses bringing together Belarusians from around twenty countries is another important area of our activity. The latest congress in November 2009 was a significant one. After a long gap, we managed to resume the dialogue between the delegates of the Congress and government officials, who had not attended the forum since the First Congress. It is revealing that the Fifth Congress focused on the national self-identification of Belarusians, thus taking this issue to the state level. Previously, Belarusian authorities did not even recognize it as an important problem for the Belarusian nation. So, these are our main achievements. Obviously, in twenty years we have run many other projects. For instance, the completion of the officially endorsed replica of the Cross of St. Euphrosyne of Polatsk was a momentous event for the whole nation.

A.K.: As you have already mentioned, up to this moment, there is no legislation that regulates the relations with Belarusians living abroad. "Backawshchyna" has repeatedly proposed such a bill.

N.S.: We started as early as in 2001, after our Third Congress. We contacted many governmental institutions, including the Parliament and relevant ministries. We even proposed a draft, but it was pigeonholed and went untouched until 2009, when the decision was finally taken and the National Legislative Center started drafting a bill on Belarusian communities abroad. Let's give them credit: they invited "Backawshchyna" representatives to the working group. However, we are concerned that in the light of recent developments in this country, the bill may be put in abeyance again. Our officials do not understand the benefits of cooperation with the Belarusian diaspora. They want quick economic benefits and do not understand that better ties with Belarusians abroad would bring much greater outcomes. Sadly, the government does not deem it necessary to support the diaspora by opening schools abroad, founding community centers, or by organizing cultural actions. All those measures are needed to consolidate Belarusians in different countries. Otherwise, as I said before, they will quickly assimilate. Better ties with the Belarusian diaspora would also allow to create Belarusian promo-centers. Currently, too many state structures are responsible for creating a positive image of Belarus abroad, for making Belarusian brands attractive. Belarusians living abroad could be very useful in this regard. Of course, that would happen only after many years of work with their communities. If someone came today to some community, trying to persuade them to promote, for instance, the "Belarus" tractors, the representatives of the community, taken by surprise, would refuse to give any help. That would be their natural reaction. But, if someone cooperated with them all the time, it would have been a different story. For instance, the government could ease the visa regime for Belarusians living abroad, following the "Card of the Pole" practice introduced by Poles. If Belarusians start feeling that they are needed in their country, they will start developing business projects, attracting know-how and investors from all over the world. Unfortunately, Belarusian government continues to divide Belarusians into "friends" and "foes," following the old Soviet tradition.

A.K.: Besides the National Legislative Center, do you cooperate with some other state institutions?

N.S.: Of course we do. Our statute stipulates that we represent the interests of Belarusians from abroad inside Belarus, so we communicate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture. We also try to establish contacts with the Ministry of Education. Some years ago, Belarusians living abroad had a quota that allowed their children to enter universities in Belarus on special conditions. In fact, the introduction of this quota was initiated by members of our Association. However, it was revoked. We applied for its renewal in vain. Sadly, it is premature to talk about a full-fledged cooperation with state institutions, because this implies partnership, an ability to accept other ideas and find a compromise and, eventually, to implement joint projects. Let's say, we are in some "relations" with state bodies. For a very long time we have been like a small hammer, knocking at the doors of different institutions and trying to bring the problems of the Belarusian diaspora to their attention. Most of those problems are yet to be solved. So, we continue raising them and sometimes demand solutions or give recommendations on how to deal with them.

A.K.: What are the most urgent problems of Belarusians, both abroad and in the country?

N.S.: The most significant problem is assimilation, which is caused, among other factors, by the lack of national self-identification. This is particularly true in the case of young people who emigrate for economic reasons and do not really regard themselves as Belarusians, so they can easily "dissolve" in other nations. Naturally, all the phenomena inside Belarus somehow influence the situation of the diaspora. For example, it is impossible to open Belarusian schools without government support. There are many Polish--language educational institutions in Lithuania, while Belarusians have only the Vilnius Gymnasium. The same is typical for Belarusian schools in other countries. However, in Belarus itself, we have a huge problem: the number of students in Belarusian-language schools is desperately low, since those schools are set up almost exclusively in rural areas and are underrepresented in big cities. Just like other countries, we have economic problems. Still, the

most important problem, in my view, is that people lose national ties. One cannot solve this problem without the government's intervention; hence some other problems.

A.K.: The Belarusian state policy seems to be national-oriented. Many slogans and projects are based on the idea of an independent Belarus.

N.S.: The issue is that most officials in charge of formulating cultural policies have Soviet mentality. Many of them have not realized yet that Belarus is a totally independent country with its own strong traditions and centuries-long history. For them, *Belarusian* is solely about ethnography and folklore. They don't fully realize that our culture is a natural part of modern European context. With such a policy in place, the majority of population still holds the stereotype that Belarusian culture is archaic. So, the state declares some principles, but chooses Soviet tools to follow those principles, without understanding that culture is a "product" to which they should attract people.

A.K.: Speaking of Belarusians abroad, what can you tell us about the size of Belarusian community worldwide?

N.S.: It is very difficult to estimate, since many Belarusian immigrants do not communicate with embassies, do not join communities, don't change their citizenship officially, yet they permanently live and work in other countries. According to different sources, about one-third of our nation, i.e. 3,5 mln people, live abroad. The biggest concentration of Belarusians is in Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Canada.

A.K.: Do you have any data on different immigration waves? Is the number of Belarusians who leave their country growing or, perhaps, falling?

N.S.: We don't have firm statistical data on this. However, we notice several obvious waves. Number one is economic immigration. Always and forever. Young professionals seek better life outside Belarus. The current conditions in Belarus are not conducive for professional development or decent wages. The number two wave is political immigration, which "livens up" from time

to time. As soon as the political situation deteriorates and the government intensifies repressions against the dissent, this wave starts growing. Political immigration growth was steadily strong until middle 2000s. Then it dropped, and stayed calm until the recent presidential election.

A.K.: The "Budzma Belarusami" civil cultural campaign is one of the most impressive recent projects of "Backawshchyna." What is the main idea of this campaign?

N.S.: Many non-governmental organizations organized numerous Belarusian-language events before this campaign. However, the Belarusian language in that context was tied to political activism, and this scared away many. In addition to that, those events were not centralized, did not have a common concept, and targeted mostly the Belarusian-speaking audience. As a result, the Belarusian community got marginalized, and Belarus split into two countries, the Belarusian-speaking one and the Russian-speaking one. We realized that such a "wedge" was not conducive to national consolidation, so we decided to start "Budzma Belarusami" campaign that aimed at promoting the modern Belarusian culture as a promising culture on a European level. This is the most solid "Backawshchyna's" project inside Belarus. We made it clear from the very beginning that we treat every inhabitant of Belarus, regardless of ethnicity, as a Belarusian. In our opinion, today, culture is the only common ground for people. We all have different political and social views. We live in atomized groups. But when we ordered a sociological survey in 2009, the results were very inspiring. First of all, since the achievement of independence, Belarusian society has changed its attitude to the language. Only a small number of people calls the Belarusian language a language of peasants or the opposition. The Belarusian language is a symbol of the nation or the language of elites for a significant part of Belarusian population. "Backawshchyna" interprets these results as an evidence of the population's mostly pro-Belarusian orientation. With the help of the campaign, we attempt to draw out Belarusian cultural activists and associations in this field from marginal environment and consolidate them. It is obvious that we should try to work together.

A.K.: What types of projects are implemented by the campaign?

N.S.: During two and a half years we had more than 1,500 events, such as history lectures, literary meetings, concerts, and exhibitions. We have managed to build some image and earned people's trust. At the very beginning our campaign was perceived as a commercial or political project. Cooperation with local authorities is our important achievement. It is not only about the fact that most public spaces are owned by the state. The attitude of local officials, their understanding of Belarusian culture, influence many other issues. People in the regions usually don't have any idea of what happens in modern Belarusian culture. Hardly any Belarusian-speaking artist reaches rural areas. So, those areas are very eager to learn more about culture. They greet us and show their interest in new aspects of Belarusian culture, and they invite us to come again. Another achievement of "Budzma Belarusami" is that we use marketing strategies to promote a national idea. We use attractive visualization, pre- and post-communication, develop high-quality scripts. An important indicator of our success was this year's festival of Belarusian-language advertising "Adnak!" that attracted twice as more advertising companies than the one before. It shows that people, especially businessmen, gradually turn to believe in the perspectives and possibilities of the Belarusian language. In just two weeks, more than half a million of Internet users watched the animated cartoon about Belarusian history that was recently presented by "Budzma Belarusami" campaign. I guess we can take it as an achievement as well.

A.K.: The problem of national self-identification is definitely relevant for Belarus. Still, one cannot ignore global changes that take place in the modern world and influence national cultures. In this context, what future do you see for the Belarusian national project as such? Is it different from the idea that was defined by Belarusian intellectuals in the '80-'90s?

N.S.: Nothing has changed at the end of the day. I mean the concept itself has not changed. Still, it is obvious that today we need to use new methods to promote our national project. First of all, we need to switch to the marketing tools that are widespread in other countries, use PR and management. Organizations that will not learn marketing tools will be forgotten, will lose their attractiveness. They will be treated as archaic. I am convinced that

modern Belarusian culture exists and actively develops in all spheres of our life. We should feel the responsibility for the quality of presentation of cultural events to the society. We, the Belarusian-speaking activists, have no right to be wrong. Our actions can either serve to keep the stereotypical image of the "archaic," "dead" Belarusian culture or, vice versa, break that image. Therefore, we have to do our job not just well, but perfectly well.

AUTHORS

Lavon Barshcheuski – honorary chairman of the Belarusian PEN Club, teacher at the informal high school of the liberal arts in Minsk.

Mariusz Maszkiewicz – involved in the democratic opposition (the Freedom and Peace movement). With the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since the early 1990s. Was the first Polish official representative in Lithuania, where he worked between 1991 and 1994. Established the Polish Consulate General in Grodno; in the years 1998–2002, served as Polish ambassador to Belarus. Penned numerous articles and books on sociology, religious studies and international relations.

Artur Klinov – is an artist, writer (books: "The City of the Sun", a war novel "Shalom") and editor -in-chief of the *pARTisan* almanac. In 2011, he represented Belarus at the Venice Bienalle with his straw copy of "The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci.

Tatyana Artimovich – is a theater director and art critic. Her works were published in *Mastactva* and *pARTizan* magazines (Belarus), *Petersburg Theatre Magazine*, *Sovremennaya Dramaturgiya* (Russia); Internet magazine *Novaya Europa*, Belarusian photographic web almanac Photoscope.By, and on Belarusian model art portal Art Aktivist.

Sergey Pukst – is a composer, arranger, pianist, guitarist and journalist. In the early '90s he was a member of the Korol Pchel punk band. Later he started playing solo (and in the band Pukstband). From 2007 to 2010, he worked as music observer of *SB – Belarus Segodnya* newspaper as well as the host of Kultura radio station's program *Zhivaya Muzyka*.

Margaryta Aliashkevich – is a poet and literary critic. She is at her final year of the PhD program at Belarusian State University. Her critical reviews appeared in *Dziejaslou* and *Verasen'* magazines, as well as in the *Litaratura i Mastatstva* weekly. Her poems were published by magazines *Teksty* and *Maladosts'* and the state-run daily *SB – Belarus Segodnya*. She appeared in radio and TV shows *Piatsiknizhzha* (Radio Liberty) and *Remarka* (Belsat TV).

Andrei Rasinski – is a Belarusian cultural and cinema expert. He works as journalist for the ***Nasha Niva*** and ***Novy Chas*** newspapers. He is also one of the experts of ***Nashe mnenie*** web resources. He teaches attraction editing at the Belarusian Humanities Collegium.

Igor Logvinov – graduated from the Philosophy Department at Belarus State University and completed post-graduate studies at the Republican Institute of Higher School in Minsk. In publishing business since 1995, he worked as the director of Mensk publishing center and the Propilei publishing house; headed the publishing department at European Humanities University in Minsk. Logvinov has been an independent publisher since 2000.

Andrei Dureika – born in 1971 in Grodno, Belarus. Between 1987 and 1991, student of art colleges in Minsk. Between 1991 and 1992, student of the Belarusian Academy of Fine Arts. Between 1998 and 2004, student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf under the direction of Prof. Gerhard Merz. Involved mainly in installations. Organizer and curator of many experimental exhibitions and projects in Minsk. Member of the Rewizja art group.

Monika Szewczyk – art historian, curator of more than a hundred solo and about twenty thematic shows; director of the Arsenal Gallery in Bialystok. Since 1990, has been into creating the original Collection II at the Arsenal Gallery.

Vaclau Areshka is Board Member of the Dyajryjush Public Association, deputy President of the Working Group of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs of Belarus, active contributor to Belarusian social and political movements since 1988. He worked as journalist for the ***Nasha Niva*** and ***Svaboda*** newspapers, as well as for RFE/RL and Radio2 (Poland).

Agnieszka Komorowska – member of the board of the East European Democratic Centre Association. For many years involved in the international programme of the Stefan Batory Foundation, responsible for the Belarusian and Ukrainian sector. Expert in the cooperation between NGOs and independent media. Author of numerous texts on the condition of the sector in both countries.

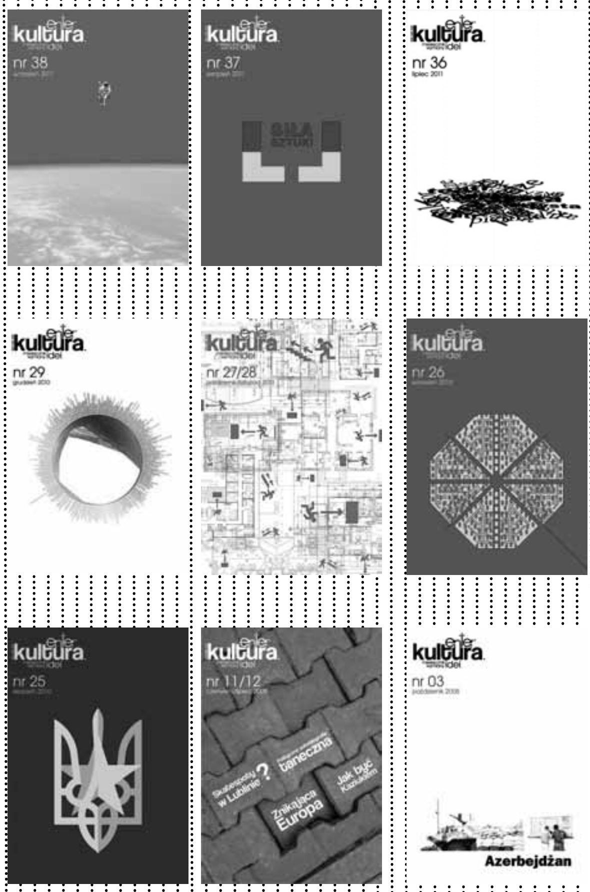
Marek Młynarczyk – coordinator of international cooperation (the Managerial Initiatives Foundation); main projects in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. Member of the Microgrant Commission for Georgian NGOs. Administration and third sector training expert. Volunteer in the program of development assistance organized by the Emmaus – International in Srebrenica (BH).

Paweł Prokop – founder and president of the Managerial Initiatives Foundation. Author, expert and trainer in international cooperation programs. Took part in implementing the public administration reform. Lectures on management, administration and public life ethics. Adviser to the Mayor of Lublin. Sits on the Foundation Council of the Between Us Foundation; Vice-President of the Emmaus Association, co-founder of the Public Administration Trainer Association; member of the Polish-Ukrainian Forum.

Ales' Bialatski graduated from Homel State University and from the PhD program of the Literature Institute of the Academy of Sciences of Belarus. He was among the founders and, later, became the chairman of the Society of Young Writers "Tuteyshyia" (1986–89). He is also one of the founders of the Martyrology of Belarus, a member of the Organizational Committee of BPF "Renaissance," one of the organizers of the Belarusian Catholic Association (1990). In 1992–1996, he was a member of the Minsk Local Council. In 1989–1998, Mr. Bialatski was the director of Maksim Bahdanovich literary museum. He has headed the Human Rights Center "Viasna" since 1997. He also serves as vice-president of the International Federation of Human Rights.

Tamara Matskevich – is the deputy chairperson of the Society of Belarusian School. Having obtained her PhD degree at Belarusian State University, she worked in the Academy of Sciences' Institute of Electronics from 1986 to 2003. In 2003, she joined the Y. Kolas Belarusian Humanities Lyceum, where she worked as teaching techniques specialist and physics teacher. Since 1999, she has been a coordinator of the program "Teacher. School. Society." She also works in the field of the methodological and civic education of teachers.

Olga Shparaga – philosopher, associate professor at EHU, editor of ***Belintellectuals*** (2005–2007), editor of ***Novaya Europa*** (since 2006), one of the coordinators of the Belarusian philosophic community.


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